

NOVEL
17

Written by
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Mushoku Tensei

jobless reincarnation

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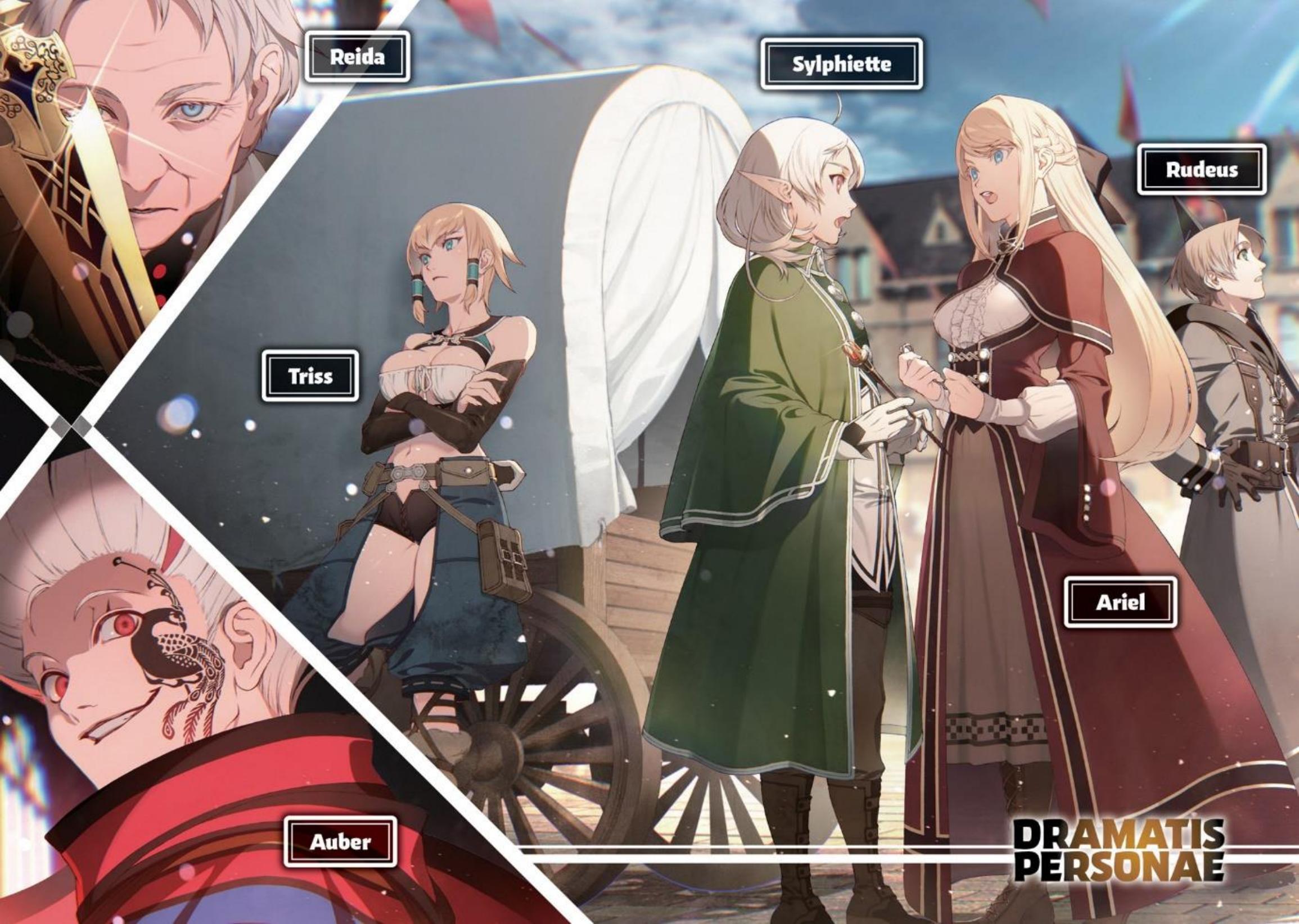
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Reida

Sylphiette

Rudeus

Triss

Ariel

Auber

**DRAMATIS
PERSONAE**

"Can't you see
how bizarre all
this is, Sylphie?"

**"Have you
lost your
mind?!
Get that
sword
away
from her!"**

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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Illustrations by Shirotaka

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*“Trust’s a pretty fragile thing.
You can break it with words, actions, or
even money.”*

—A strong will is the most trustworthy of traits..

*AUTHOR: RUDEUS GREYRAT
TRANSLATION: JEAN RF MAGOTT*

Chapter 1: The Road to Asura

THE JOURNEY FROM Ranoa to the Kingdom of Asura usually took several months. But fortunately, we had access to the teleportation circles.

Our first stop was Perugius' floating fortress, where we could teleport ourselves and our carriage to a spot just north of the Asuran border. From there, we'd be travelling more conventionally down to our destination.

"Oh wow! This is incredible, Rudeus! That town's just a tiny speck from up here!"

Eris hopped from her horse in excitement within moments of our arrival at the fortress. With her mouth wide open, she stared over the edge at the ground below, then snapped her gaze to look up at Perugius' imposing castle. She looked more like a kid at an amusement park than a twenty-year-old woman. It was definitely cute, but I think most of us also felt a little secondhand embarrassment.

Still, her obvious excitement seemed to please Perugius' servant Sylvaril, who'd been waiting for us in front of the teleportation circle. "How do you like the view from our floating fortress Chaos Breaker, miss?"

"It's amazing!" replied Eris, with a big smile. "I've never seen anything like this before!"

Sylvaril nodded, looking very satisfied indeed. I guess he had a soft spot for the 'little ray of sunshine' types. Understandable.

"It's kind of you to say so. Allow me to introduce myself—I am Sylvaril of the Void, first among the servants of Lord Perugius. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

“I’m Eris Greyrat!”

By this point, Eris was shooting eager glances at the castle. Picking up on her enthusiasm, Sylvaril led the way forward, taking her on a kind of guided tour. The rest of us followed behind, watching them while smiling.

Eventually, our party arrived at the audience hall.

“Ah, there you are.”

Just like the last time, we found Perugius leaning in his tall chair with a haughty expression and his loyal spirits at his side.

We were mainly stopping by today to pay our respects. Ariel took a graceful step forward, ready to deliver some formal spiel. But before she could get a word out, Eris broke from the group and strode right up to the master of the castle.

“And who are *you* supposed to be?” Perugius asked, sizing her up with a glance.

I had a vision of Eris leaping forward to take a swing at him, and a chill ran down my spine. The man was more indulgent than you’d expect, but that didn’t mean he would tolerate that kind of disrespect.

As I stepped forward to intervene, however, Eris abruptly dropped to one knee. “It’s an honor to meet you, sir. I’m Eris Greyrat, who recently became Rudeus’ wife. Thank you for your hospitality.”

I stopped in my tracks and blinked in surprise.

“Ah. I am Perugius Dola, known as the Armored Dragon King. I know of you, Eris Greyrat. You’re the so-called Berserker Sword King who challenged Orsted himself, yes?”

“It’s nothing worth boasting of, sir, but I am.”

“Hm...”

Eris was speaking in an unusually humble tone, but the words were coming out a little flat and forced. I was beginning to suspect she'd actually memorized all of these lines beforehand.

"Well, Eris Greyrat, I find your modesty most endearing," continued Perugius, looking genuinely pleased. "Allow me to apologize for that unfortunate incident eight years ago, when my subordinate assaulted you."

Eris looked up with a dubious expression. Clearly the girl didn't even remember what he was talking about. "Uh, it's all water under the bridge!"

"Is it? My thanks, then. You're most understanding."

Chuckling softly, Perugius waved his hand in a lordly gesture of welcome. Eris rose to her feet and walked back to us with a satisfied smirk. I could practically hear her saying, *See? I can handle this stuff just fine when I put my mind to it!*

The girl really had rehearsed this whole thing. I was fully convinced of that now.

In any case, it seemed she'd left a good first impression on Perugius. He hadn't been nearly so friendly to *me* the first time we met. I guess Eris' openness was just naturally endearing.

Well, whatever. At least it didn't turn into a brawl...

"Please follow me, everyone."

A little later, after Ariel had offered her own greeting, we followed Sylvaril back out of the hall. The teleportation circle we'd be using was located a little farther behind the one we'd come through. We found it in the rear of a large, empty hall, glowing faintly in the gloom.

Sylvaril took the time to give us a lecture on the history of the hall itself, but I'll just omit all that. The most important thing was that this particular teleportation circle would take us to a forest close

to the Asuran border. Perugius had a number of other circles in his fortress, but this was the one that would bring us closest to our destination.

Unfortunately, it wasn't like functional circles remained in every city on the map. All of those in the floating fortress itself were kept active by Perugius' mana, but in order to actually use them, the circle on the *other* end also had to be actively powered.

Under normal circumstances, you'd have to ensure both circles were activated simultaneously by people on either side. Which sounded incredibly inconvenient. But there was a workaround of sorts, which involved a kind of special magical implement. Supposedly invented by the same genius mage who created the teleportation circles themselves, these implements were capable of automatically absorbing mana from their surroundings to keep the circles perpetually active.

However, they only worked in certain areas where the air was thick with mana. That naturally limited the locations where the teleportation circles could be placed. This was probably the reason why the circles I'd used on my way to Begaritt, for example, had been in such inconvenient spots—deep in the forest, or way off in the desert.

Generations of researchers did eventually find a way around this issue. Circles in other places could be continually powered by magical crystals, as long as they were regularly replaced. It was a manually-powered alternative to the older, automatic design. The Kingdom of Asura was located in a region with very low mana density, so nearly all of its teleportation circles had been of this newer type. They were powered when strictly necessary, and left inactive otherwise; only a handful of people even knew where the magic crystals needed to be placed in order to activate them.

It was a moot point now, though. All the manual *and* automatic teleportation circles in the entire country had recently been destroyed by some unknown party. The only one who knew where to find them all was the Man-God. And the only person with the power to have them all destroyed was the High Minister Darius, who could call on private forces dotted all across the kingdom. Those were our best guesses as to the culprits at the moment, at least.

Unless you had a suitable place, suitable tools, and extensive knowledge of magic circles, you had no hope of making a teleportation circle yourself. In other words, we couldn't have made one for ourselves inside Asura. We were going to have to take a somewhat longer road to our destination.

Anyway. We'd managed to work out *our* travel plans, but I had to wonder how Perugius was planning to show up later on. When I brought this up at our audience, he'd brushed off the question, telling me that I didn't need to worry myself about it.

Ariel seemed to be aware of the details, at least. Maybe he was planning some sort of dramatic surprise appearance.

We stepped into the teleportation circle, and soon found ourselves standing in a ruin. Its layout and construction were very similar to that of the building in the desert I'd teleported into on the Begaritt Continent.

From what Orsted told me, there had once been many structures of this sort all around the world, and many of the races had moved freely between the continents. After their misuse for military purposes, however, their use and construction had been forbidden. Some of the Dragonfolk had strongly disagreed with this decision. They secretly protected a number of the circles they

regularly used with subtle magical barriers, which was the only reason there were still a decent handful of the things lying around. Some people just don't give a damn about the 'common good,' I guess.

Not that I was complaining or anything. Thanks to their selfishness, we could move around the world a bit more easily.

We made our way out of the ruin and found ourselves standing in a thick, vibrant forest. Based on the map we'd studied beforehand, we were just a bit northwest of the narrow valley known as the Red Wyrm's Upper Jaw.

Unfortunately, we ran into a bit of a problem right off the bat. We'd gotten our carriage onto the teleportation circle just fine, but now we couldn't get the thing out of the ruin. You'd think somebody would have realized that was going to be an issue, right?

Before I could feel too disgusted with myself, though, Ariel's two attendants began steadily taking the carriage apart. Bit by bit, they broke it down into pieces and carried them out the door. The thing had struck me as unusually small, but it was apparently a model that could be disassembled.

We strapped the parts of the carriage to our horses and made our way slowly to the main road, where the thing was quickly reassembled. The sun was setting by this point, though, so we decided to set up camp nearby and spend the night there.

Since we were surrounded by a lush forest, it was easy enough to procure both food and kindling. We hunted a few beast-like monsters for their meat, picked some wild plants for seasoning, and killed a few Treants for their wood.

Honestly, it felt like you couldn't go ten feet in this world without stumbling over a Treant of some kind. There was even one

living in my front yard these days. They were probably going to take over the planet sooner or later.

Normally an improvised camp like this would have meant settling on the bare ground, or maybe a log. But to my surprise, one of Ariel's attendants rolled out some nice, thick carpets for us to sit on. I suppose royalty always traveled in style, regardless of the circumstances.

Sylphie and Ariel's attendants took care of all the cooking that night. When I offered to help, they gently shooed me away. Given Sylphie's superior skills, I probably would have been more of a nuisance than anything else. I told them to let me know if they needed any additional plates or cutlery; it was easy enough for me to make more of those.

I found myself with nothing to do while the food was being prepared. I briefly thought about keeping watch, but Ghislaine and Eris were already standing guard, so I wasn't going to be too useful there either.

I had no specific role to play on this trip. That was actually a first for me. I'd travelled solo for years, and as a temporary member of many parties, but I'd never been total deadweight before.

Back in my adventuring days, my large supply of mana meant that I was assigned all sorts of odd jobs. I could create plates and forks from thin air and produce clean drinking water on command; those kinds of skills were highly prized. But now that I found myself in a well-supplied group with two attendants who could use magic, I suddenly had nothing at all to do but sit around. It felt a little awkward.

Then again, I wasn't here to wait on Princess Ariel hand and foot. My task was to identify the Man-God's disciples and deal with them, one way or another.

Currently, I had some suspicions about Ariel's knight Luke, as well as the Asuran minister Darius. That was two out of three. It seemed likely that the third and final disciple was either the North Emperor or the Water God, who'd joined the cause of our enemies.

Orsted had given me instructions on how to face them both. But before I actually met them on the battlefield, I needed to take some time to carefully consider how those fights would play out in practice.

I glanced over at Luke with these thoughts running through my mind. He was standing at attention beside Ariel, clad in his impressively shiny armor. For all appearances, he was ready and eager to defend her from any unexpected danger.

There was a very good chance Luke was currently a disciple of the Man-God. Still, I believed he would put his life on the line to defend the princess. It wasn't like being the Man-God's disciple made you his loyal puppet or anything. I knew from experience how it worked—the slippery little jerk would give you all sorts of advice that *seemed* helpful, only to betray you at the very last moment.

In other words, the Man-God's disciples were usually his victims. Even good, honest people could be misled by his lies. It wasn't Luke's fault he had an evil god manipulating him. That made me very hesitant to even consider killing him. Apart from everything else, he was a key member of Ariel's faction who'd provided her with all sorts of support over the years. He'd still have a crucial role to play, even after she became queen.

Of course, the Kingdom of Asura wouldn't be helping Orsted in his quest for another hundred years. Luke would be dead by then either way, so maybe his fate wasn't that significant. Still, it had to be important for Ariel to be an *effective* queen, right? Having Luke around might help her maneuver things in the right direction...

Well, maybe. Or maybe this was one of those fixed “turning points” in history. In other words, if Ariel became queen, things would work out somehow. And if the First Prince took the throne instead, we were headed for a bad end no matter what.

The idea still seemed really odd to me. Reality *had* to be more complicated than a scripted video game, right?

At the end of the day, I had to rely on Orsted’s knowledge about this stuff. And it was hard to say if he would ever give me a complete explanation of things. He’d never gone into much detail about the crucial events that would occur a century from now. I’d pressed him once about the Man-God’s claim that his actions would “destroy the world,” and he’d simply said, “That is a possibility, to be certain.”

Honestly, killing the Man-God seemed to be the only thing that mattered to Orsted. I didn’t get the sense he cared about what came after that. And at the moment, I couldn’t afford to worry about what might happen a hundred years down the road. I had my hands full keeping my family safe in the present. Was that irresponsible? Shortsighted? Yeah, probably. Couldn’t bring myself to care, though. The people living in the future could deal with their own problems.

Still, I had to wonder why my descendants would join Orsted knowing that his victory might destroy the world. Maybe they *weren’t* going to know. The idea made me feel kind of bad for them.

It couldn’t hurt to leave them a message explaining it was a possibility, right? Probably?

“Rudy, dinner’s ready! Ghislaine, Eris, come get some food!”

My thoughts had wandered quite a bit by the time those words snapped me back to reality. I’d have to write a nice long diary entry after we made it back from Asura. I had a feeling some of this stuff might slip my mind otherwise.

Ariel retired to her tent at nightfall. The rest of us would be camping outside, keeping watch over the area on alternating shifts.

There were seven of us in the party, apart from the princess. Two of us were enough to keep an eye on things, but we'd have one shift with three people in it. We decided that one person on this larger shift would leave the camp and patrol the nearby woods, looking for anything unusual. This would have to be someone capable of defeating monsters on their own—which meant me, Sylphie, Eris, or Ghislaine.

That first night, this role fell to me.

“Okay, I’m going to go take a look around.”

I nodded to the others, stepped away from the light of our fire and made my way into the depths of the forest. Soon, I was surrounded by inky blackness, with nothing but a torch to light my way. I could sense there were no enemies in the immediate area, but it was still slightly unsettling.

“Hm...”

After five minutes of steady walking, I’d travelled a good distance from our camp.

That was when someone suddenly stepped forward out of the darkness.

A moment before, there’d been *nothing* in front of me. And now I was staring up at a tall, silver-haired man with sharp golden eyes and a terribly intense face.

Yelping reflexively, I fumbled with my torch, very nearly dropping it.

“Eee! Uh... pardon me. It’s good to see you, Sir Orsted.”

“Right.”

I seated myself on a nearby tree root, trying to slow my racing heart. Orsted settled down on another, facing me at a distance of several feet. The man had trailed our footsteps. I'd known that was the plan all along, of course. Perugius was probably aware of this as well, since Orsted had likely used the same teleportation circle as us.

I was expected to make periodic reports to Orsted during our journey. The others might get suspicious if I disappeared on my own too frequently, so the plan was to meet up once every several days, whenever it was my turn to scout the area.

"How are things so far?"

"Luke hasn't done anything suspicious, and the journey's going smoothly at this point."

These were the two things he'd tasked me to monitor. But it was only the first day, so there wasn't much to say. Orsted clearly hadn't expected anything else, either.

"That makes sense," he said with a nod. "I wouldn't expect anything to happen too quickly."

"Right."

"However, be on your guard when you pass through the Upper Jaw."

"Yeah, absolutely."

The Red Wyrm's Upper Jaw was a narrow chokepoint that connected the Kingdom of Asura and the Northern Territories through the tall mountain range that separated them. It was a single path, just wide enough for two large carriages to pass each other by. Orsted had very nearly killed me in a similar pass down south, which was called the Red Wyrm's *Lower Jaw*.

Once we made our way down the valley, we'd arrive at a large, dense forest known as the Red Wyrm's Whiskers. This place was well-known to the people of Asura, although they often just referred

to it as part of the Upper Jaw. This forest was technically in Asuran territory, but the physical border wall was located just to its south. There the kingdom had built a great fortress which completely sealed off the pass; it was manned by hundreds of soldiers at any given time.

That fortress had several purposes. Primarily, it prevented the forest's monsters from wandering south into Asuran territory, and discouraged any attempts at invasion from the north.

There was one other crucial reason for its placement, though. That forest just to the north was a very convenient place to *dispose* of inconvenient people. The Red Wyrm's Whiskers were essentially outside Asuran territory, and the density of the trees made witnesses less likely. The forest was crawling with monsters and border-straddling bandit gangs, too. It was the ideal place to make someone disappear.

Assuming Darius was really getting advice from the Man-God, there was an excellent chance we'd encounter some kind of an ambush there. Dispatching his forces further north would be a risky violation of another country's territory, and once we were south of the fortress, any attempt on the princess' life would likely be witnessed, and word of mouth would spread the story. The forest was the single least risky place for him to murder Ariel. That was where he'd strike for the first time.

Or so Orsted had concluded, anyway.

"I'll proceed as planned, then?" I asked.

"Yes."

If there was an attack, I could use it as evidence to discourage any further travel on the main roads. Once I convinced them that heading straight for the capital would be too risky, our search for alternative routes should lead us straight to hiring Triss and her group of bandits.

If there *wasn't* an attack, Orsted was planning to take action himself. Which meant a false flag operation, basically. Orsted had brought a number of summoning scrolls, and magic crystals to activate them with. The monsters they would summon weren't native to this area, so I could convincingly argue someone had sent them after us.

Either way, things should work out according to our plans.

"If there is an attack, the North Emperor Auber Corbett will likely be there. Be very cautious when you face him."

"Yeah. We went over that already, right?"

"We did, yes..."

The Asurans had apparently hired the services of both the North Emperor and the Water God, but the odds were good they would send the former to kill us. According to Orsted, Auber's style was well-suited to this kind of dirty work. The man was a perfect personification of the North God Style, as bizarre and unpredictable as they come. Everything about him was *odd*, from his clothing to his hairstyle to his techniques. They called him the Peacock Blade, and he was a master of surprise attacks.

"I can't help but worry," Orsted murmured.

"About what?" I asked.

"You, of course."

I just blinked at that.

"There's a battle close at hand," he continued, "But you seem... almost unconcerned."

Unconcerned?

Well... maybe I wasn't as tense as you might expect, under the circumstances. But I felt like we were prepared for this. Orsted had told me how to fight Auber. There was no guarantee he'd show up, but if he did, I'd simulated our battle in my mind many times over

the last few days. I knew the man was a dangerous opponent. I didn't see how getting nervous was going to help matters. Keeping my cool was important if I wanted to survive. There was no guarantee I'd be victorious, but... it was probably *better* for me to stay relaxed, right? Probably.

"Take these with you, just in case."

Orsted retrieved a few pieces of paper from within his coat. They were scrolls covered in complex magic circles.

"This is King-tier healing magic," he explained as I accepted them. "You're only Advanced in that school, yes? Use these if the need arises."

"Oh. Thank you..."

I couldn't tell you what King-tier healing spells did off the top of my head. I felt like they were strong enough to regenerate a lost limb, if necessary. My evasive and defensive abilities were somewhat limited, and my opponent's offensive skills were top-notch. It probably *was* a good idea for me to have something like these up my sleeve.

"I didn't even know there were magic circles for healing magic this advanced."

"Almost all known spells can be replicated through the use of circles."

"Almost? So there's some exceptions to the rule?"

"Yes. Certain unique spells with unusual means of activation, primarily."

"Like what?"

"The Howlcasting of the Beastfolk, the gravity magic of the King Dragons... spells of that nature cannot be used without an understanding of the principles involved."

Howlcasting had to be what I'd always called *vocal magic*. I'd managed to pick up a bit of that myself—enough to startle people with my voice, at least. It was hard to say how much of that effect came from the magic itself, though... having someone shout at you is kind of startling in general.

"You said your future self could use gravity magic, yes?" Orsted continued. "That must have taken considerable time and effort. You must study the forms, understand them thoroughly, *and* learn how to put them into practice."

"People, uh... say you're capable of using basically every kind of magic. Can you cast gravity spells yourself?"

"I can. They're not especially useful for my purposes, however."

That's Orsted for you. Really, why did I even bother asking?

"Did you learn all of your spells and techniques one by one? You weren't born knowing all of this, were you?"

"No. I had to learn everything I know over time."

Hmm. At the moment, I could only vaguely imagine the principles behind gravity magic. I didn't even know what the magic entailed, exactly. But if I spent long enough puzzling it over, maybe I'd eventually hit on some clever way to make an object weightless or something.

I didn't have time to pursue something I might never figure out, though. For the foreseeable future, I needed to focus on the task at hand. This sort of stuff could wait until I had a chance to catch my breath.

Okay. Anything else I need to ask about...? Oh, maybe Luke.

"Just one last thing, Sir Orsted. If Luke does turn out to be a disciple of the Man-God, you're letting me decide whether to spare his life, correct?"

"Yes."

“Let’s say I spare him, and Ariel manages to become queen. What would happen to him in that scenario, you think?”

“Nothing in particular. Once we make it that far, it will mean his release from the Man-God’s curse.”

“The Man-God can only have three disciples at once, right? Can we really let one go, and just *hope* he stops controlling them?”

“There’s no need to worry about that. The Man-God can only influence a disciple until his foresight of their future becomes clear.”

Wait, what? Couldn’t you have mentioned this a little earlier, boss? This seems kind of important! Doesn’t that mean he could suddenly swap out a disciple in the middle of a fight or something?

“Additionally, his foresight is limited by the presence of certain turning points. In this case, the outcome will hinge on Ariel’s attempt to defeat Darius and Grabel. The Man-God cannot see the players’ future past this as of yet.”

“So that means... they won’t be changing disciples on us until the outcome is decided?”

“Exactly.”

Okay, yeah. This would have been good to know earlier. Well... at least he told me now, I guess. No point filing a complaint about it.

So. Until this power struggle was completely resolved, the Man-God’s disciples weren’t going to change. And once it *was* all over, they’d naturally be freed from his control... although it was possible he might reach out to them again later on to use them in some other scheme.

On another note: it sounded like no matter what, the Man-God couldn’t take on a new disciple until we reached the turning point. Which meant that killing one of them would reduce the number of pawns at his disposal for now.

It was definitely the *smarter* choice to take them out, if at all possible.

“Okay... I should head back now. They might get suspicious if I’m gone too long.”

“Very well.”

I rose to my feet, and the first of our regular meetings was adjourned. I hurried back to the campfire and reported that I hadn’t seen anything unusual. The next shift soon took our places, and I slipped under my blanket.

The first day of our journey had passed uneventfully enough.

Chapter 2: The Red Wyrm's Upper Jaw

THE UPPER JAW ITSELF was a single road that took us through a narrow valley. The path wasn't as straight as the Holy Sword Highway, but it *was* just as simple. There were no side roads or forks to worry about.

This place was basically a border zone, unclaimed by any nation. It was also a choke point for trade. After a few hours of travel, we met a large caravan heading in the opposite direction.

At a glance, I saw about a dozen covered wagons and more than fifty horses laden with goods. They probably belonged to Asuran merchants on their way to the Magic Nations. There were also tougher-looking sorts trudging along on foot at regular intervals: adventurers who'd been hired as guards, judging from the way they glared at us.

The sight brought back some memories. I'd joined a caravan much like this one on my way up to the Northern Territories. It had been a smaller one, though, with younger guards and merchants.

Back then, I was all alone in the world, and feeling *very* sorry for myself. In the immediate aftermath of Eris' disappearance, I was convinced that my future would be bleak and lonely. I lost the ability to put my trust in anyone or anything. The only things that kept me sane were my routines: training myself, and mumbling prayers to my holy idol.

I'd come a long way since then.

Thanks to Sylphie, I'd regained my confidence. I was a father now—maybe not the best one in the world, but still. I'd cleared up that misunderstanding with Eris and married her as well. Somehow, I'd even wound up married to my beloved teacher Roxy, who'd be having my second child soon.

With three loving wives, I wasn't spending many nights sad and lonely anymore. What would young Rudeus say if he could see me now? I had purpose in my life, and all the emotional support I needed.

"...Are you gonna say something, or what?"

Eris' voice pulled me out of my thoughts; I guess we'd ended up riding side by side at some point. I wasn't much of a horseman, so I was riding pillion with Sylphie.

"Hey, Eris..."

"Yeah?"

"Can I grope you for a minute?"

"What? No. Don't be ridiculous!"

Hmm. Well, I could *ask* for emotional support, at least.

Anyway... the sight of me flirting with my wives probably wouldn't cheer young Rudeus any. He'd probably just smile weakly and say "Congratulations," then slink away as quickly as possible. That was just the way I was back then. I knew *other* people were capable of being happy, but I'd convinced myself that it was never going to happen for me. The least painful option was to keep my distance.

"..."

"Uhm, Rudy?" asked Sylphie, glancing in my direction. "Why did you ask Eris for permission, but not me?"

As I was thinking about the past, my hands had apparently worked their way up to Sylphie's chest. No wonder I'd been feeling something soft against my palms.

"Whoops! Sorry, sweetie. Didn't even know I was doing it, I swear."

"There aren't any monsters around here, so it's not *that* big a deal... but keep your hands to yourself once we hit the forest, okay?"

“Thank you, Sylphie! You’re an angel! I’m sorry, really!”

“You do realize you’re still groping me, right?”

Smiling slightly, Sylphie scratched behind her ears in a gesture of mild embarrassment.

To be honest, I’d been doing this a *lot* ever since we got married. At every available opportunity, more or less. Sylphie had sort of gotten used to it by now, and I definitely wasn’t getting tired of it.

“You can ride behind me tomorrow, Rudeus!” said Eris, from beside us. Before I could respond, she spurred her horse to the front of our party, blushing furiously.

Aw, did I make her jealous? Heh heh...

Anyway. We were coming up on the end of the valley, and the entrance to the forest. I had to assume there was an ambush waiting for us in that place. It was time to focus on the job at hand.

At the very end of the Red Wyrm’s Upper Jaw, we had an almost panoramic view of the forest that stretched out ahead of us. The entrance to the valley was elevated enough that we could see all the way to the fortress walls on the other side. Still, the trees grew tall and dense here, so it was impossible to trace the road we’d be taking past the point where it twisted into the woods. There was no chance we’d spot anything that might be lurking deep inside waiting for us, and it was clear enough nothing that happened in there would be visible from the outside.

The fortress’ walls were tall enough that the soldiers on that side could easily monitor the valley entrance where we stood. In other words, they could keep track of who entered the forest and who left it.

But we couldn't see the fortress' gate over the tree line from our vantage point. Anyone coming from the Asuran side had a geographical advantage. This really was the perfect place for them to attack us.

"Well... I guess we're finally back," Sylphie murmured quietly, bringing her horse to a halt at the entrance to the forest. Luke had stopped as well, along with the carriage. Eris and Ghislaine drew to a halt a moment later.

Ariel's two attendants disembarked from the driver's seat of the carriage. Without a word, Sylphie and Luke dismounted. A moment later, the princess herself emerged from inside the carriage, carrying a small bouquet of flowers.

The five of them walked together toward a stone sitting at the side of the road. It was a perfectly ordinary-looking rock for the most part, but someone had carved an X deep into its surface.

Ariel stepped in front of the group, bent down and placed the flowers on top of the stone, then brought her hands together in the Millis style of prayer.

I knew the princess wasn't particularly religious. This was the first time I'd ever seen her pray, in fact. Luke and Sylphie weren't too pious either, though I wasn't sure about attendants. But they all knew the people buried under that stone. It was the final resting place of all the knights and mages and attendants who'd fallen fighting for Ariel in this forest. They'd been attacked numerous times on their journey to the north, but many had died in an ambush here. And some of those people had probably been believers.

"There's a much greater risk of ambush here," said Ariel quietly. "Let's camp just outside the forest for today, and then push through it in a single day tomorrow."

With that, Sylphie and the others walked back to their horses, looking much more serious than before.

That night, we went over our battle formation one more time. We also reviewed our techniques and skills, and discussed how we should react to various combat situations.

Eris and Ghislaine would be our frontline. Sylphie, quick-witted and versatile, would be supporting them in the mid-field. And I would hang back, trying to position myself so I could monitor the entire battlefield with my Eye of Foresight.

Luke and the two attendants would be focused solely on Ariel's personal safety. Their gear was solid, but in all honesty, we didn't want to integrate them into our battle plans. They'd just get in the way on the frontlines with Ghislaine and Eris. Anyway, we wanted someone close to Ariel at all times, in case of any surprise attacks.

Cleane the attendant would be acting as a body double for the princess, with the help of a magical implement that could change her hair color and facial features. This was the reason why both attendants had hair of similar length to Ariel's. They were a little different in build and height, but there wasn't much we could do about that. Cleane was closer to Ariel in height, so the role had fallen to her first. If she were killed, Ellemoi would take on the job in her place.

In a sense, Ariel was starting out with two bonus lives. Our goal was to get through this without losing any of them. I didn't know Cleane or Ellemoi very well, but it would still feel terrible if we failed to protect them.

Tomorrow, we'd proceed on the assumption we were walking straight into a trap.

"We saved a lot of time by teleporting here," someone objected. "Won't the assassins be dispatched much later?"

"Minister Darius is a very thorough man," Ariel replied. "He likely took action the moment he learned of my father's declining health."

The real question was what kind of "action" he'd taken. None of us could say for sure. We did know that he'd retained the services of two powerful swordsmen; and it seemed reasonable to expect that the North Emperor Auber Corbett would be the one to attack us here.

I had considered telling everyone about Auber's style and how to counter it. But if he and Luke were both disciples of the Man-God, that might come back to bite me. It seemed safer to keep my silence... the last thing I needed was to have Auber ready and waiting for my strategy. For this first battle, at least, I needed to handle him by myself. It would require constant vigilance to protect everyone in the party.

Well... Ghislaine could probably take care of herself no matter what. But still.

I had to be on top of my game tomorrow.

The next morning, we set off bright and early in the formation we'd agreed on.

Ghislaine and Eris took the lead on horseback, followed by Sylphie, with whom I was riding with again. I'd wanted to take Eris up on her offer, but I needed to be further back so I could assume my position if necessary. The carriage with Ariel and her attendants was a few lengths behind us, with Luke bringing up the rear on his horse.

As we moved cautiously down the single path through the woods, we approached a sharp curve with poor visibility. There was a

mark carved into a small tree just before the bend which looked a bit like a dollar sign.

This was a signal Orsted and I had worked out in advance. It meant there was an ambush waiting for us just ahead. Apparently, I wouldn't need to resort to faking an attack on my own party.

Gripping my staff tightly, I activated my Eye of Foresight and fed mana to the Zaliff Gauntlet so I could use the stone of absorption in its palm at any time. Poison darts or arrows might come flying from the woods at any moment. They might even hit us with a high-tier offensive spell. With my Eye activated, I'd be capable of responding to either situation.

As it turned out, that wasn't necessary. Maybe a dozen armored soldiers waited for us around the curve, blocking the road completely.

"Whoa!"

Eris and Ghislaine drew their horses to a sharp halt, then paused.

"Who are you?!"

The armored soldiers didn't respond to Ghislaine's words of challenge. Their full-face helmets hid their expressions completely. One of them had a large, colorful plume on their helm—could that be Auber?

No. It was probably just their captain. Auber was supposed to be *much* flashier.

The soldiers remained silent, but didn't move. They clearly had no intention of letting us pass.

"Hop off, Rudy," Sylphie said quietly.

I got off the horse and backed up closer to the carriage. Sylphie promptly spurred her horse forward, positioning herself between Eris and Ghislaine. "I am Fitz, guardian mage!" she called out, her

eyes fixed on the plumed soldier. “Are you aware that this carriage carries Ariel Anemoi Asura, Second Princess of Asura? Who are you, and who do you serve?!”

Wow. That girl can sound really intimidating when she wants to...

The plumed soldier didn’t say a word in a response. Instead, he drew his sword. The rest of the soldiers quickly followed his lead, filling the air with the sound of ringing metal.

In that same moment, *many* more armored soldiers emerged from the forest on either side of the road. The majority carried swords, but I saw a few with staffs as well.

“We’re under attack!” Sylphie shouted.

I risked a quick glance backward. Luke had already gotten off his horse and assumed his position in the rear, watching our backs. Ellemoi was frozen in the driver’s seat of the carriage, gripping the reins with a tense expression on her face; I could see Cleane inside the carriage itself, disguised as Princess Ariel.

Everyone was in position, in other words. I turned my attention back to the soldiers in front of us.

“Hraaaah!”

“Graah!”

Eris and Ghislaine were already barging into the enemy’s frontline, cutting down the heavily armored soldiers like wheat, their strokes so swift I couldn’t even see them. The enemy had drawn their weapons first, but we’d still gotten the first blow. That was how just *fast* those two were.

“I’ll take care of the magic!” Sylphie called, countering a spell as it flew in their direction.

So there were mages some distance behind the main force, although I couldn’t see them from my position. The enemies I *could*

see numbered more than thirty at this point. More were still springing out of the forest, so their actual force was surely larger. But against the likes of Eris and Ghislaine, mere numbers didn't mean much. They were thinning the enemy's ranks faster than the enemy could replenish them.

Eris moved quickly and impulsively. Ghislaine followed close behind, covering her blind spots. And Sylphie supported them both with quick, accurate spells. Together, they were cutting efficiently through the entire squad of trained fighters, never giving the enemy a chance to surround them.

I knew all three of them were skilled, of course, but even so I was a bit surprised by how smoothly they were working together. I guess they'd gotten used to working as a team during our expedition to the Library Labyrinth. In any case, they seemed to have the situation under control for now.

"Luke!" I called, shooting another look back toward the carriage. "Are there any enemies coming at us from behind?!"

"None!" came his reply from the rear.

Weird. It's like they're inviting us to retreat, huh? Maybe it's a trap?

Yeah, I'm thinking trap.

"Should we fall back?!" Luke shouted.

"No, I think we can break through them," I replied. "Let's push forward and..."

I turned my attention back to the frontlines, and trailed off mid-sentence. The enemy ranks had parted suddenly, and someone was striding forward through them.

Eris and Ghislaine stopped dead in their tracks.

The new arrival was... less imposing than I'd expected. He was less than a meter tall, in fact.

It was a halfling. A halfling in full body armor—polished, shining body armor. His squat little body was gleaming so brightly that I was reminded of a disco ball.

Still, the enemy soldiers looked visibly relieved to see him stepping forward. They clearly had some respect for his skills. Was this little guy a master swordsman? Maybe even Auber himself?

“I am the North King Wi Taa, one of the three blades of the North God! They call me *Light and Darkness!*”

Do they really, though? Never heard of you.

“I take you for the Black Wolf Ghislaine, madam. I challenge you to a duel!”

With those words, the walking disco ball drew his sword. The thing was made to match his proportions, so it was only around thirty centimeters long. Just like his armor, though, its blade gleamed brilliantly.

I wasn’t sure why he was asking for a one-on-one duel with our strongest single fighter, given that his forces significantly outnumbered us. Maybe he had some kind of trick up his sleeve?

“Hmph,” Ghislaine snorted, pointing her blade at the little swordsman. “Very well then! I am Ghislaine, the Black Wolf of the Sword God Style! Your challenge is accepted!”

This seemed to bring the formalities to an end. Ghislaine squared off against her foe, holding her sword at her waist.

For everyone else, it felt like time had stopped moving. The enemy soldiers had broken off their advance, and were watching at a distance. Sylphie glanced in my direction, then took a few steps back as well, keeping a watchful eye on the enemy soldiers. The North King’s sudden arrival had turned a chaotic melee into a tense, dramatic stalemate.

It might have stayed that way, too, but Eris apparently hadn't noticed the change. Now that Ghislaine had the North King occupied, she took the opportunity to charge straight at the passive enemy soldiers.

"Graaah!"

"Wha— Eris?! Wait!"

Startled, Sylphie hurried forward to lend her support. Within seconds, Eris was right back in the thick of a wild battle, with Sylphie covering her back.

Could those two hold out on their own? There were a *lot* of enemies... but for the moment, they hadn't even grazed anyone on our side. Yeah. They seemed to have it under control.

I wanted to join in, of course, but I couldn't risk moving or using any spells right now. For one thing, Eris' wild charge had opened up a dangerous amount of space between our frontline and the carriage that we needed to protect. And more importantly, Auber hadn't shown himself yet. I had to stay put until I saw him.

The North Emperor was an expert when it came to surprise attacks. His favorite strategy was to wait until his target was distracted, then pop up behind and cut them down. The concept was extremely simple, but his timing was *flawless*. He'd come for you in the one brief moment where your mind was elsewhere, or your attention flagged.

When facing powerful mages, he particularly liked to attack them right after they cast a spell. For that reason, Orsted had firmly warned me not to use *any* magic in this battle if Auber wasn't visible—even if my allies were in danger. It was just too risky. As long as I waited patiently enough, Auber would eventually change his target from me to someone else who'd let down their guard. The instant he appeared would be my best chance to take him out.

Because of all this, I really wanted to stay put for now. My most important job at the moment was keeping a careful watch on everything around me.

This was going worse than expected, though. We hadn't anticipated that a North King would be here as well. If Auber had any other powerful allies waiting in the wings, we might have to risk a retreat.

"Kuh!"

"Haha! What's the matter, Black Wolf? Not so bold now, are you!"

As it was, Ghislaine wasn't faring that well against Wi Taa. Her movements were kind of strange, honestly. Whenever she started to attack the halfling swordsman, she'd pause momentarily to look away, and Wi Taa always took advantage of those opportunities. Moving with remarkable speed for such a rotund little man, he would dart right up to her and launch a series of quick thrusts. Ghislaine managed to evade these attacks, but it was forcing her back, and he'd landed a few grazing blows that left her bleeding.

For some reason, Ghislaine couldn't get on the offensive. I kept seeing her about to swing her sword, only to flinch to the side and let Wi Taa take advantage of the opening. The halfling was doing *something* to her, but I couldn't tell what it was from where I stood.

I turned my attention to Wi Taa and watched his movements closely. The little disco ball's armor was shining so brightly that it was hard to even look at him, honestly. When he wasn't on the offensive, he seemed to be keeping a set distance from Ghislaine. Every now and then, he'd swing his left hand forward, although he wasn't holding anything in it. Could he be using some kind of magic?

Just after he moved his left hand, I saw Ghislaine flinch once again. Maybe he was throwing something in her face? Some kind of sand or powder?

No, that didn't feel right. I was staring right at his hand, and I didn't see him throwing anything. Sometimes he didn't even point his hand directly at her. But there was definitely a connection between that movement and the way Ghislaine kept hesitating.

...Wait, I get it.

He was hitting her with *light*. He was using that mirror-like gauntlet to deliberately reflect the sun right into Ghislaine's eyes, dazzling her in the moment she tried to attack.

Talk about a cheap trick. It was surprisingly effective, though. At this rate, Ghislaine might actually lose. I had to decide whether I should intervene. This wasn't looking good, and if I hesitated now I might lose my chance to help.

Damn it. What do I do?

I didn't know for sure if Auber was even here. Was I going to watch Ghislaine die because I was too scared of some guy who might be a hundred miles away?

...All right, let's do it.

Channeling mana into my staff, I formed a combination Earth and Water spell—a loose variation of my go-to spell, Quagmire.

“Mud Rain!”

Dark clouds covered the sky, and chocolate-colored rain poured down across the battlefield. This was nothing more than muddy water, with no offensive effects whatsoever, but once it hit the ground, it quickly transformed into a soupy morass, throwing off the enemy troops. Within seconds, the armored soldiers were slipping and falling over each other.

Eris and Ghislaine had trained to fight in any conditions, so the mud didn't affect them much. Sylphie wasn't bothered either, although her hair quickly took on an unpleasant brown tint.

“Nwhaa?! What is this trickery?!”

But unfortunately for Wi Taa, his beautifully polished armor was now covered in sludge. Which meant its reflective effect had disappeared entirely.

“Graaaah!”

Ghislaine’s roar of challenge echoed through the forest as she whipped her blade forward from the hip. Wi Taa tumbled nimbly to one side, but he was too slow to react, and Ghislaine’s Sword of Light was too fast. There was a loud metallic *clang*, and Wi Taa fell back with blood spraying violently from his shoulder.

Okay, we’re good. Now back to looking for Auber.

I spun around to check the area behind me...

“Huh?”

“Oh?”

...and the guy was standing right there.

His appearance was eccentric, to say the least. He wore a rainbow coat with loose pants that only reached his knees and carried *three* swords at his hip. There was a colorful tattoo of a peacock on his cheek, but his gravity-defying satellite-dish hairdo was just as striking. Dirt poured off his drab brown cloak as he pushed his way through the trees; the path he’d made led back to a nearby hole, perfectly positioned outside of Luke’s range of vision.

The man had been hiding behind us all along. In a hole in the ground.

“...”

His outfit and his approach to combat matched Orsted’s description perfectly. This had to be the North Emperor Auber.

“My goodness, you actually noticed me.”

In the next moment, my Eye of Foresight showed me Auber moving.

He brandishes the sword in his right hand.

“But I’m afraid a mage stands no chance at this distance...
Goodbye, my friend!”

He swings his sword down.

Reflexively, I brought my left hand forward. The Zaliff Gauntlet I wore felt all but weightless, but Auber was still going to be faster.

I did have one last card to play, though.

“Fly, my hand!”

“Whoah!”

At my command, the gauntlet launched itself forward with incredible speed. But Auber had sensed the danger and rolled backward at the last moment, just managing to get out of the way. The gauntlet slammed into a tree somewhere far behind him.

Wide-eyed, Auber looked back toward the gauntlet, then back at me. “W-Well, *that* was certainly peculiar...”

It seemed I’d startled him. That was good, since I wasn’t especially calm myself right now. My heart was pounding fiercely in my chest. I’d *known* Auber was going to try something. Orsted had warned me in advance. But I’d ignored his advice and landed myself in a mess. I had to hold him off by myself.

My enemy was an Emperor-class swordmaster. Ambushes might be his specialty, but that didn’t mean he was weak in a duel. The one thing I had going for me was that Orsted had *also* told me how to fight effectively against his style.

Calm down, man. You’re strong. You got this! You’re number one! I’m strong. I’m stro-on. I’m Stallone. The Italian Stallion!

“So you’re Quagmire Rudeus, eh...”

Whoops. Right, I already have a nickname. And I’m not a boxer, I’m just Rudeus.

For some reason, Auber wasn't attacking. He was just standing there... and talking to me.

"I've heard plenty about you, but I see there's some truth behind the rumors. This might be something of a challenge."

Why was he hesitating? I couldn't counter his attacks unless he went on the offensive. "Where did you hear about me?"

"Oh, this was back when I was teaching a certain wild beast how to use the sword. The little creature was always going on about how incredible you are."

Wait, what? This guy knows Eris?

"I knew a man capable of charming that young tiger had to be a peculiar sort, but I never imagined you could *actually* shoot your hand off like a rocket..."

It sounded like my robot punch had made a big impression. He seemed to be watching me warily, in case I had any other tricks up my sleeve. He seemed to think I was some kind of sideshow.

I would have been offended, but his cautious attitude suited me just fine. In the corner of my eye, I saw that Ghislaine had chased off Wi Taa, and was heading our way. Once she got over here and made this a two-on-one fight, our odds of victory would go up dramatically.

"Hmm. Eris, Ghislaine, Silent Fitz, and Quagmire Rudeus. I brought along Wi Taa mostly as a precaution, really...but now that I've failed to finish you off, this might prove rather challenging."

Auber paused for a moment, then nodded to himself. Was he finally going to make his move?

"But a worthy challenge is always welcome!"

It sure sounded that way. Fortunately, all I had to do was hold him off for a few seconds; once Ghislaine was here, we could hit him from both sides. And I knew most of the moves he was likely to open with.

I could do this. We could take him out.

“My name is Auber Corbett, the North Emperor!”

Returning the sword in his right hand to its sheath, Auber drew another with his left hand. I channeled mana into my staff, ready to intercept his charge—

“And I shall now... depart! Adieu, my friends!”

At which point he spun around and ran off. Not toward me, but directly back at Ghislaine.

Uh, what? Is he... leaving?

“Auberrrr!”

“Oh my! Hello there, Ghislaine! It seems...”

“Graaaah!”

“...you haven’t changed a whit, my dear.”

Auber grabbed one of many small bags from his coat and tossed it in Ghislaine’s direction. It arced slowly toward her; reflexively, she slashed it apart in mid-air.

The thing exploded into a cloud of what looked like smoke, which then hit her right in the face. This wasn’t good.

“Stone Cannon!”

“Goodness!”

My spell was targeted precisely at Auber’s back, but he dodged it easily without even glancing my way. Ghislaine could have followed up on this opportunity; unfortunately, she was too busy sneezing and wiping the tears from her eyes. He’d apparently hit her with some kind of pepper spray equivalent.

Auber didn’t slow down to attack her, though. Instead, he scuttled past her like a cockroach and sprinted to the frontlines of the battle, where Eris and Sylphie were on the verge of wiping out his forces.

"Retreat!" he called. "Fall back! We'll have to try this one again!"

The surviving soldiers turned to flee into the forest, and Eris' head snapped around. She hadn't noticed Auber until now, but she reacted quickly, leaping in front of Sylphie to meet his charge.

"Graaaah!"

"My blade, be as a flaming torch!"

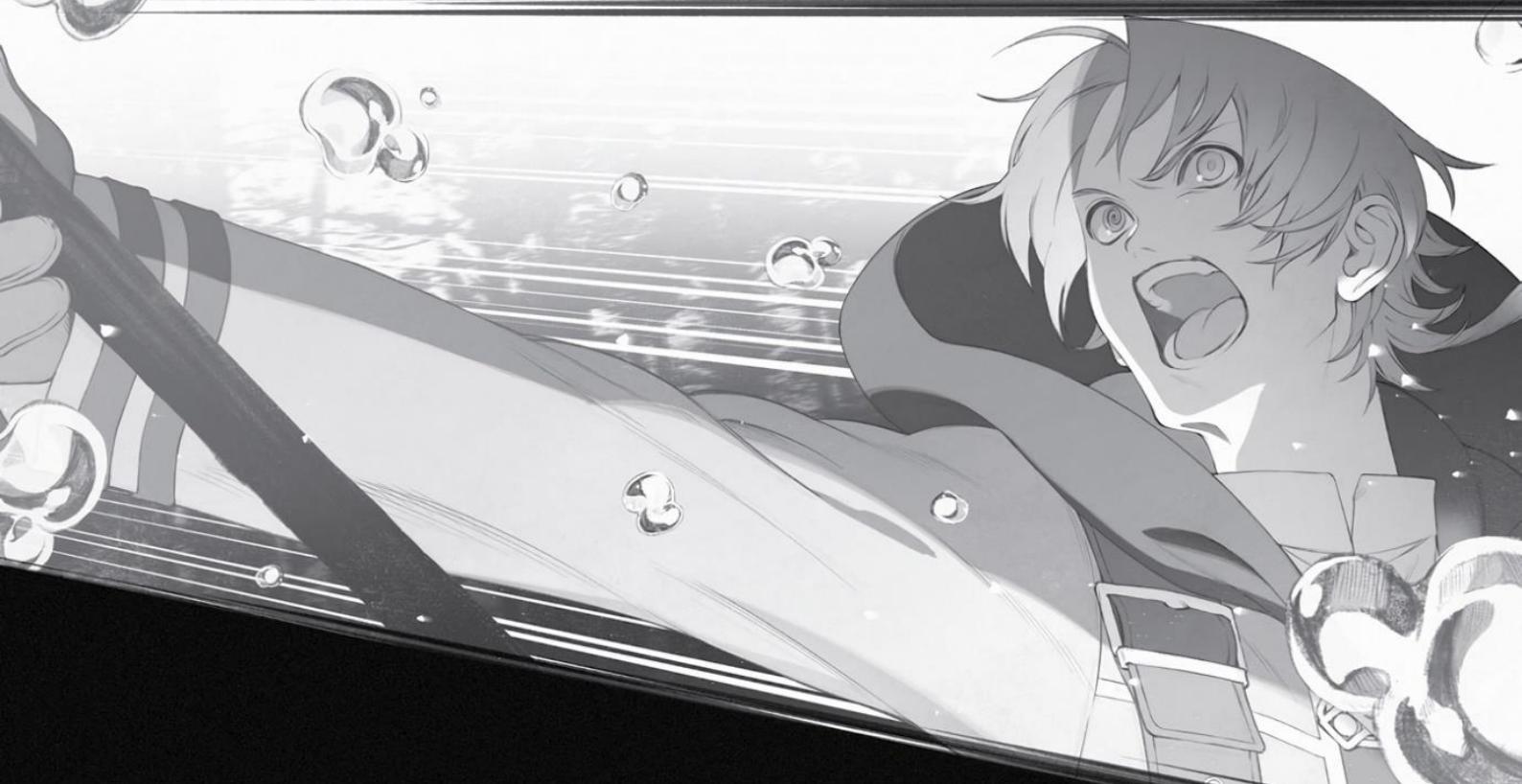
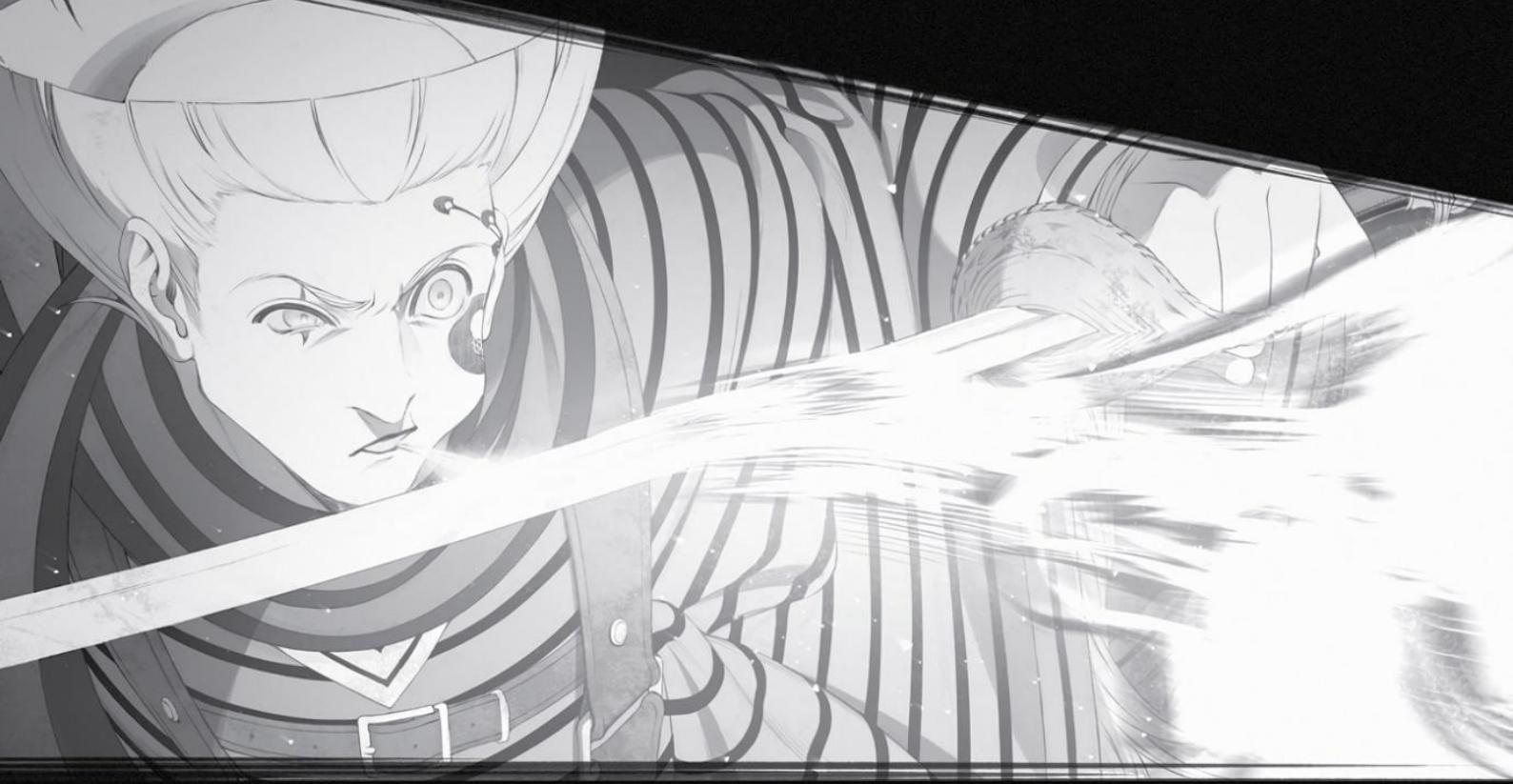
With this brief incantation, Auber's sword burst into flame. Sidestepping nimbly past Eris' attack, he grabbed something from his hip and brought it to his mouth.

I'd heard about this move from Orsted. And I had time to react.

"Fwooooh!"

"Water Wall!"

Auber spat out all the oil in his mouth at once, igniting it with his burning sword. A stream of flame rushed toward Eris. But just before it could reach her, the fire hit the wall of water I'd summoned up at the last moment, and was instantly extinguished.



Eris didn't even flinch. She slashed her sword diagonally from a point high above her head, looking to slice through both my wall and the enemy in one stroke.

"Taaah!"

Her sword was too fast to see, but I *heard* her strike hit home. She'd cut Auber in two; the upper half of him tumbled to the ground.

"We got him!" I yelled happily. But for some reason, Eris just clicked her tongue in irritation.

On second examination, I realized that the thing lying on the ground in front of her wasn't Auber's body after all. It was a log. An ordinary wooden log, wrapped in a dirty brown cloak.

I'd been watching the entire thing with my Eye of Foresight active, but I had *no* idea what I'd just seen.

A moment later, something came flying through the air toward the log.

It was a metal claw tied to a rope. The claw snagged hold of the cloak, then jerked quickly backward, pulling it through the air to fall at the feet of the man who held the rope.

That was Auber, of course. Somehow, he was standing off in the forest wearing a *different* cloak, this one camouflaged with a layer of grass and flowers.

Instead of fleeing right away, he'd taken the trouble to retrieve his brown cloak. That meant it was valuable to him. Maybe it was a magic item that allowed him to swap places with whatever the other cloak was wrapped around? That would explain the disappearing act...

The guy's some kind of ninja. You could have warned me about that trick, boss!

"You've improved considerably, Mad Dog!" called Auber. "I'll take my leave for now, but I look forward to our next encounter!"

"Hey! Get back here!"

"Don't follow him!" said Sylphie, moving to intercept Eris as she tried to charge after Auber. "There are still soldiers in those woods. You can't run off on your own!"

Eris shot a hopeful glance in my direction; I just shook my head. For a moment she gazed regretfully in the direction Auber had fled, but eventually she sheathed her sword with a grumpy "Hmph."

With her prey gone for now, Eris came towards me. Sylphie was keeping a careful eye on our surroundings, her rod still in her hand, but it seemed like the enemy had completely disappeared. The only armored soldiers I could see were the ones we'd killed in battle.

I breathed a small sigh of relief. We'd managed to survive their first attack, at least.

That didn't mean we could relax, of course. Auber could hit us again at any time, especially if we got sloppy. At the very least, we'd have to stay on alert until night fell.

In the aftermath of the battle, we took some time to review the situation.

The enemy squad had been nearly wiped out, and we'd emerged basically unscathed. Ghislaine was sniffling and sneezing for about an hour, but that was the worst of it.

I got a little worried when both healing and detoxification magic didn't help with her condition, but it improved quickly once we tried washing out her eyes with a water spell. It was surprising how many things "healing" spells couldn't fix, really. They probably wouldn't work on pollen allergies, either... although I hadn't really encountered such things in this world.

Before moving on, we decided to dispose of the bodies of our would-be assassins. I would have just left them where they were, but

we were in the middle of a forest—their bodies would turn undead if they stayed out too long. And there was something of a taboo against abandoning corpses, just in general. Our whole party got to work stripping off their armor, dumping anything that looked like a personal possession in a pile, then burning the bodies themselves.

Partway through this process, I noticed that Luke looked distressed. In fact, his face was getting noticeably paler with every passing minute. It wasn't like he'd never seen a dead body before, though... he seemed to be fixated on the soldiers' armor, in particular.

"Luke, isn't this crest... uhm..."

The reason for his reaction became clear soon enough. Among the many soldiers we'd killed, a decent number had a specific crest engraved on their armor. It was the symbol of the Milbotts region, and by extension, of the Asuran lord who controlled it.

Milbotts was a rich territory ruled by one of the four great noble houses of Asura. And apparently, their troops had been dispatched to join the attempt on our lives.

"I can't believe it," Luke muttered to no one in particular.

It was all too clear what this meant.

Pilemon Notos Greyrat, the lord of the Milbotts region, had betrayed Princess Ariel.

Chapter 3: Suspicions and Theories

ABOUT AN HOUR after the attack, we pitched camp in a spot fairly deep inside the woods. I encircled our campfire with a low stone wall to keep the light from giving our location away, and we settled down for a full-fledged strategy meeting.

“This can’t be. It doesn’t make any sense...”

Luke was still muttering to himself, his expression stunned and disbelieving. Ever since we spotted the crest of Milbots on the armor of those soldiers, he’d been off in his own world, struggling to come to terms with what he’d seen. It felt fairly obvious that his father had betrayed Ariel’s cause and dispatched those soldiers to murder her, but I guess he didn’t want to believe it.

In contrast to his shocked reaction, Ariel and her other allies seemed to have taken the news in stride. I got the feeling they’d viewed this as a possibility all along.

I had to wonder why Luke seemed *this* surprised. Obviously, Pilemon was his father, so that probably had something to do with it. But maybe the Man-God had been whispering half-truths in his ear as well. Maybe he’d just found out that his new friend wasn’t being entirely honest with him.

Which seemed plausible. The Man-God tended to keep a lot of things to himself, especially when the facts were inconvenient. Maybe this was a chance to confirm my suspicions.

...No, not yet. Let’s get the conversation moving in the right direction first.

“Your Highness,” I said, “There’s something we should discuss.”

“Yes, Rudeus? What is it?”

“Auber shouted ‘*We’ll have to try this one again,*’ as he fled. I think it’s very likely that he’ll be launching repeated ambushes on us at some point in this forest, and maybe even after we cross the border.”

“Yes, I imagine so,” said Ariel, tilting her head slightly. “What’s your point?”

The look on her face suggested that she’d expected all this from the very beginning.

“We managed to ward him off this time, but Auber seems to be even more dangerous than I expected, and he has a lot of troops at his disposal. It looks like they’re deadly serious about taking you out. I think their next ambush will be much more carefully planned and dangerous.”

“...You think we might not prevail?”

I nodded firmly. “It’s hard to say for sure at the moment, but I’d expect their next attack might come right at the border fortress itself. They could easily have laid a trap for us there, and it won’t be easy to break through by force.”

“Perhaps so, but there are no teleportation circles active within Asura. We have no choice but to press forward.”

So far, this conversation was going exactly as I’d hoped. Ariel was making this very easy for me. It felt like she already suspected what I was getting at.

“Right. We do need to press on. But that doesn’t mean we have to blunder right into a trap that we know is waiting for us.”

“Oh? Are you saying there’s some way we might cross the border without passing through the border checkpoint?”

“Yes.”

“What did you have in mind?”

At some point, many of the others around the campfire had started listening intently to our conversation. It made this feel a bit more awkward, but I pushed on anyway. “I’m familiar with a group of bandits based nearby that primarily makes a living by smuggling goods and trading slaves across the border. With their assistance, we could make it to Asura without moving through the checkpoint.”

Ariel brought a hand to her chin and considered this. Sylphie was staring at me with a slightly dubious look on her face. Eris and Ghislaine didn’t seem to be paying attention.

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” Ariel said, “but didn’t you previously argue that we should *avoid* resorting to any shady business?”

“Yes, and I still feel that way. But I think I misjudged how serious our predicament is. I don’t think we can afford to be too choosy about our methods at the moment.”

“I see.” Ariel nodded and looked around the campfire. Her gaze settled on Sylphie, who was frowning slightly at this point. “What do you think, Sylphie?”

“It sounds... reasonable to me. I don’t know how much we can trust these bandits, but I do trust Rudy’s judgment. If he says it’s less dangerous this way, I believe him.”

Sylphie’s words sounded sincere enough, but there was a hint of displeasure in her voice. I think she was a bit upset I hadn’t mentioned any of this to her beforehand. But if I *had* discussed the possibility with anyone ahead of time, it would have made me look awfully suspicious when Auber popped up to push us in the right direction.

“And what about you, Luke?” Ariel said, turning her attention toward him.

The man raised his head slowly, almost like a zombie, and fixed his eyes on me. There was something like hostility in them.

"What are you playing at here, Rudeus?" he murmured, his voice trembling slightly. I could see the suspicion on his face now, clear as day. "Your behavior in that battle was... strange. It felt as if you knew Auber was going to launch that sneak attack."

"I anticipated he might try something, yeah."

"It almost seemed like you knew all about his combat style..."

"Well, I do have the Eye of Foresight, remember?"

And why do you know all this anyway, Luke? You were supposed to be watching our backs. Auber was in your blind spot, wasn't he?

"Auber certainly retreated quickly from that battle. And cleanly."

"True. I imagine he would have played it differently if he'd managed to kill me with that first attack."

"Couldn't you have stopped him from escaping, if you really wanted to?"

"...Maybe, if I used a spell with a large enough area of effect. But I would have hit Eris and Ghislaine as well, and there's a good chance he would have escaped anyway, thanks to that weird magic cloak of his."

"Hmph. If you say so."

Hey now. It sounds like you're implying that I might be working with Auber behind the scenes, buddy.

Well... this actually made some sense, now that I thought about it. Telling Luke that I was allied with Auber and Darius would be the easiest way for the Man-God to manipulate him, at least in the short term.

The thing was, that whole idea would fall apart if you just thought about it for five minutes.

Get it together, man. I know you're upset about your dad trying to kill us and everything, but I'm not the enemy here.

"Come on, Luke. You're the one who asked me to help Princess Ariel, remember?"

"I did, yes... but none of this makes *any* sense. Why did my father betray us? It wasn't supposed to be that way..."

What was that supposed to mean? This was getting stranger by the second. I was feeling increasingly convinced that the Man-God had told Luke *something*, although it was hard to say exactly what...

Hmm, wait a minute. What if the Man-God can't see Luke right now?

I was wearing that bracelet Orsted had given me, and it supposedly acted as a kind of "jammer" that blocked the Man-God's sight. There was a chance he had foretold events inaccurately in his conversations with Luke.

Another possibility also came to mind. Maybe the Man-God had decided Luke wasn't useful anymore, and abandoned him entirely.

"You got something you want to say, or what?" said Eris. The girl was glaring at Luke threateningly from across the fire. I felt like she was on the verge of taking a swing at him.

Sylphie didn't say anything, but her eyes were darting warily from me and Luke and back again.

Ghislaine just looked puzzled. Mind games were never exactly her strong suit, I guess.

"Your Highness," said Luke, looking up with a stern expression on his face. "I'm opposed to this plan. Rudeus' behavior makes me fear he's hiding something."

"...Does it?"

"We have no proof whatsoever that these bandits are trustworthy. I agree that it would be unwise to pass through the

checkpoint, but I think our best option is to turn back for now and ask Lord Perugius for assistance.”

Ask Perugius for help, huh? There was definitely some logic to that. If the man lent us a handful of his servant spirits, we could come back and overwhelm our enemies.

Sure. It felt like a reasonable alternative. As long as Ariel made it through this alive, I didn’t mind that much either way. The only reason I was pushing the bandit plan was that I wanted to meet up with Triss, and maybe I could go off to handle that on my own. Still, there *was* a risk that Ariel might get assassinated in my absence...

“Ellemoi, Cleane,” Ariel said. “What do you two think?”

“Sir Luke has my support,” said Ellemoi.

“And mine,” said Cleane.

“I see.”

The attendants were both on Luke’s side as well. That put things at three to two in their favor.

Of course, Asura wasn’t a democracy. Quite the opposite. At the end of the day, Ariel’s vote was the only one that really mattered.

Well... if the decision went against me, I’d just have to go meet Triss on my own. I could always say I was going to scout ahead inside Asura while they doubled back or something. They might get suspicious if I went alone, so I could ask Sylphie or Eris to tag along...

Ariel didn’t ask Eris or Ghislaine for their opinions. Instead, she fell silent for a while, lowering her eyes and gazing deeply into the fire. She was clearly lost in thought.

“All right.”

After a while, she looked up again. Her gaze moved between mine and Luke’s several times, then came to rest on Luke’s.

“We’re going to go with Rudeus’ plan.”

“What?!” said Luke angrily. “But why?!”

“I don’t believe Lord Perugius will be inclined to recognize a woman who fled to safety at the first sign of trouble as the rightful queen of Asura. We mustn’t turn to him unless it’s absolutely necessary.”

As she spoke those words, Ariel sent a quick, meaningful glance in my direction. What was the message there? Was she taking my side on this for a reason? I didn’t entirely understand. It was convenient, of course... but I couldn’t see why she’d chosen to trust me over Luke. That made me feel a little uneasy.

“But with this plan, you’re risking your very life. Are we really going to turn to *bandits* for help instead? For all we know, Rudeus is planning to sell you to them as—”

“Luke!” said Ariel sharply, cutting him off mid-sentence. “What’s the matter with you all of a sudden? You can’t really believe that Rudeus would do such a thing, can you?”

“But... my father...”

“Lord Pilemon has likely betrayed us, yes. But we’d always known that was a possibility. You yourself once warned me that he might do so under certain circumstances.”

“W-Well, yes, perhaps I did. But I *know* I heard that he—”

Luke stopped himself abruptly, bringing his hand to his mouth.

I blinked in surprise. Ariel looked somewhat startled also. Her eyes went wide, and I saw her lips tremble slightly.

“Luke. I don’t want to even consider this, but has my brother...”

Ariel trailed off, leaving the rest unspoken. If she completed that sentence, and accused Luke of disloyalty, there was a chance she’d be forced to break her ties with him here and now. I think she’d probably realized that herself.

Ultimately, she found a different and less risky approach.

"Luke Notos Greyrat, tell me what you are."

Luke looked up, startled, to meet her gaze. His eyes moved briefly to the worried faces of Sylphie, Ellemoi, and Cleane, then returned to Ariel.

Without breaking her gaze, he kneeled in front of her and spoke.
"I am your knight."

"That's correct. And I am your princess."

Ariel nodded firmly, and Luke lowered his head.

They both seemed almost rejuvenated in that moment. They'd figured out what mattered most, and put it into words. Nothing else really mattered.

Sylphie and the attendants looked relieved as well. Those two did have a special bond. That much was for sure.

"Well then, let's get moving right away. Rudeus, will you lead the way?"

"All right."

In the end, our party would be seeking help from the local bandits after all. Luke wasn't about to betray us.

Still, I felt more uneasy than before. That conversation had confirmed, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that he *was* a disciple of the Man-God.

The first step was to head back to the main road through the forest.

I knew how to get us to the bandits' territory. One of the rocks by the roadside would be marked with a certain symbol; all we had to do was head into the woods right there and head due east. The

group made their home on the far eastern edge of this forest, under a steep rock face at the foot of a mountain.

Once we entered the forest again, our speed dropped dramatically. The main issue was that we had to disassemble the carriage and load it on the horses. Ariel stayed on horseback for a time, but as we travelled deeper into the woods, she ended up getting down to walk. There were so many trees and tangled roots all around us that anyone riding was at risk of being thrown off their mount.

Heading due east was simple enough in theory, but the forest was so thick that we struggled mightily to navigate it. We had to pull the horses along, forcing our way through wherever we could. Sometimes I even resorted to blasting a path open with my magic. Clearing trees like this wasn't the best idea; it was a clear sign that we'd passed through that area, after all. But we'd leave traces of our presence any time we had to fight a monster anyway, so there was no chance we could hide our tracks completely. Our group was large, and burdened down, and most of us weren't exactly masters of stealth. There was no point worrying about it.

We stopped for breaks numerous times. It was mostly for Ariel's sake, since her legs were aching terribly. She probably wasn't used to walking through this kind of terrain; still, she took the pain stoically. We were only pausing long enough for her to catch her breath while Sylphie used healing magic on her legs.

We all barely spoke. And in the absence of conversation, your thoughts tend to wander. I don't know what the others were thinking about as we trudged along in silence, but my thoughts turned to the Man-God, his disciples, and the things he might have told them.

Specifically, I was trying to figure out what *advice* he might have given Luke. It seemed safe to say that he'd told Luke something, but

it was unclear when this had happened, and what he had said. Based on my own experience, the Man-God didn't hand out his little hints that frequently. Sometimes he repeatedly showed up in a brief span of time, but his visits were generally spaced out annually. Assuming the same was true for Luke, he'd probably only gotten one prophecy so far, or maybe two.

I could think of at least one possibility. Before that trip to the Library Labyrinth, Luke had come to ask me for my help. Maybe the Man-God had told him something like "Go ask Rudeus to join forces with you. It'll work out to Ariel's advantage." It was a good explanation for his actions at the time.

Judging from Luke's reaction to the attack today, however, I had to think he'd gotten another visit or two after that. This time, he had snapped at me at every opportunity. He seemed convinced that I was the culprit behind everything that was going wrong. Maybe the Man-God had told him... uh... "Rudeus is planning to seize control of the Notos house," or something?

That was just ridiculous, though. Anyone could see I wasn't remotely interested. I wouldn't be living all the way up in Sharia if I gave a damn about Asuran politics, right? Hell, I'd avoided Ariel for years because I didn't want to get mixed up in all that.

That said... Luke might feel very differently. Everyone thinks of whatever *they* want most as incredibly valuable, right? And if you hear someone wants to steal it from you, well, you'll probably get suspicious.

Wait. Did that mean Luke was dying to be the next head of the Notos family? Never would have guessed it, to be honest.

Anyway, there wasn't much point speculating about this endlessly. I had to wait and hope for more information.

What about High Minister Darius Silva Ganius? Orsted was convinced he was the Man-God's second disciple, and I was inclined

to agree. At this point, it would be shocking if he *wasn't*. What was the Man-God whispering in his ear?

At the very least, he'd probably warned the man that Ariel was on her way back to court. Ariel believed that he'd anticipated her return from the moment the king fell ill. Even so, it seemed unlikely that he'd dispatched a force this strong on the basis of a hunch. The North Emperor Auber and the North King Wi Taa were both key weapons in his arsenal. Would he really have sent them here unless he knew for a fact that Ariel was coming? The safer play would have been to keep them close, to discourage the Second Prince from trying anything.

We'd also teleported to this forest. It was hard to say how fast information could travel from the city of Sharia to Asura, but it seemed impossible that he'd sent those two up here *after* hearing about Ariel's departure.

Finally, there was the fact that Auber had come straight for *me*, instead of trying to assassinate Princess Ariel. They seemed to be aware of who I was and my abilities. Was there a chance that Darius' real target was me, rather than the Princess?

Hmm. It probably didn't matter either way. The two of us were dangerous to both Darius and the Man-God. There was no need to manipulate the man like Luke; the Man-God just needed to provide him with accurate information.

The identity of the third disciple was still unclear. It seemed that Pilemon Greyrat had betrayed Ariel. Was there a chance that was the Man-God's doing?

Probably not, actually. In the future recorded in that diary, Eris had been staying at Pilemon's mansion. And Eris was a member of the Boreas family, who were loyal to the First Prince. That seemed to imply that Pilemon would have betrayed Ariel no matter what. Plus... in terms of his capabilities and influence, the man was basically just a

less useful version of Darius. All in all, it felt unlikely that the Man-God had chosen him.

What about Auber, then? From the sound of things, he'd brought Wi Taa along because he knew about the members of our party. Then again, that was information Darius could easily have given him. It seemed premature to make conclusions about Auber based on our single meeting. Clearly, he was particularly wary of me, but again, that could easily be due to something Darius had said. One way or the other, we'd probably end up having to kill the man.

...I'd been thinking this over for a while now, but I hadn't reached any real conclusions or hit upon any brilliant insights. Oh well.

Speaking of Auber, though, that guy really did have a bizarre combat style. He clearly carried all sorts of strange items, magical and otherwise, and knew exactly how to use them. There was more where that pepper-spray and oil had come from, without a doubt. And it was easy to fixate on his flashy, peculiar tricks, but according to Orsted he was also formidable in an ordinary swordfight.

I'd gotten an accurate description of the guy beforehand. Still, hearing him described was very different from actually seeing him in action. I didn't feel like I'd let down my guard, or made any glaring mistakes. At that moment, Ghislaine had really needed my help. But he'd still taken that brief opportunity to sneak up behind me. The next time we met, I *really* wanted to take him out for good.

Orsted had warned me that the man was practically impossible to track down once he got out of your sight. Despite his brightly colored costume, he was somehow capable of just... melting into the trees. He'd earned his title, clearly. Although he honestly felt less like a "North Emperor" or a "Peacock Blade" than a ninja master.

Hadn't been expecting to find any of those guys in this world. The place was just full of surprises.

Hmm. I might have to try making my own version of that pepper bomb thing... or maybe the oil capsule...

We kept moving all evening, but eventually it grew too dark to continue. We pitched our camp in the woods, and set up a rotating watch as usual.

I took this opportunity to make my second report to Orsted. After that battle, there was a great deal I needed to tell him about.

“So Auber got away, then?”

“Yes. I’m sorry. I know you told me how to handle him, but...”

“It’s all right. It takes time to put advice into practice. And once Auber decided to flee, you had essentially no chance of catching him.”

After making the call to retreat, Auber’s movements had been *very* swift and decisive. He had all sorts of attacks, feints, and diversions, and he’d used a magic item I wasn’t familiar with. Orsted was likely familiar with all his tricks and strategies, but there was no way I could anticipate them all perfectly.

When you put it that way... couldn’t Orsted just go on ahead and kill him for us?

Hmm... well, it probably wasn’t wise to ask too much of the boss. Leaning on him constantly would not be good in the long run. Dealing with Auber was a job he’d delegated to me. I needed to find a way to get it done.

“What was the deal with that Wi Taa guy, though?”

“Someone must have summoned him here, I suppose. It was likely the Man-God’s suggestion.”

“...Hmm. Do you have any information on him?” It wouldn’t hurt to get a better idea of what that halfling was capable of, at least.

“They call the man ‘Light and Darkness’. He’s a North King with a bizarre style, and a pupil of Kalman the Third. I believe he’s served the Notos family for many years as a bodyguard.”

The Notos family? Huh. Maybe he’d taught Paul how to fight, back in the day?

“As his nickname suggests, he’s a master of optical trickery. During the daytime, he uses his polished armor as a mirror to blind his enemies; at night, he covers himself in ink and uses thick black smoke to hide himself in the darkness. You’ll want to make his armor dirty in the day, or light up the area with fire magic at night.”

“Makes sense.”

Once you knew how his gimmick worked, he didn’t sound like an especially intimidating opponent...

“As long as you counteract his tactics, Eris or Ghislaine should be able to handle him. But be aware that his skill with the sword is genuine. Don’t let down your guard for an instant.”

Ah. So the cheap tricks were just there to give him a little edge, then? That made sense. You couldn’t make it to a rank like North King with nothing but a couple of weird gimmicks.

“In any case, I doubt Wi Taa was the only one they summoned,” Orsted continued. “I’d expect they’ve hired others as well.”

“Other... North King level masters?”

“I wouldn’t expect any Sword Kings, but you might encounter Water Kings, Water Saints, and perhaps a Sword Saint.”

“You think they hired every swordmaster they could get to overwhelm us with numbers?”

“I doubt Darius would spend so lavishly on other bodyguards with the Water God already on his side. I would guess there’s another one or two at worst.”

The Water God was the ultimate trump card. It made sense that they’d gotten a little cocky after securing her services. The Man-God might have pestered them to bolster their forces further, but I could see Darius brushing off that advice.

“However, all the three blades of the North God should be in Asura at this time. There is a possibility they were hired as a group.”

“The three blades of the North God? I don’t think I’ve heard of them before.”

“Ah, yes. I’ll explain...”

Apparently, this was the name that a group of *four* top-class North God swordsmen had given themselves as a way of asserting their supremacy. All of them used particularly strange techniques, and had a strong craving for the spotlight. Orsted went over the list of members, and offered a few comments on how to deal with them. Then we moved on to the next topic.

“So what do you think about this situation with Luke?”

“It’s a positive sign. Because he has the gift of foresight, the Man-God is inexperienced at conventional *prediction*. When he manipulates multiple disciples at once, it’s common for him to undermine himself in this way.”

Basically, the Man-God had been giving advice to his disciples without really thinking through the effects it might have on the others. Luke’s stunned reaction today suggested an inconsistency between his reality and the advice that Darius or Auber had received. The Man-God’s prophecies were accurate, but he’d probably lied to Luke about something else. That tended to be his style; he’d tell you anything at all, if he thought it would make you do what he wanted.

“It did occur to me that the Man-God might have abandoned Luke at this point, also...”

“That’s entirely possible. Luke’s destiny is weak, so I doubt the Man-God ever viewed him as a particularly valuable pawn. His main role was likely just to keep an eye on your movements. And with me close by, he’s no longer even capable of that.”

“But the Man-God only has three pawns to play with, right? Would he really use one for just that purpose?”

Orsted frowned and shook his head. “The Man-God can see *everything*, and any exceptions to that rule are terrifying to him. He had every motivation to keep watch over you.”

“...Okay, I think I get it.”

The Man-God’s vision was the ability he relied on most heavily, and we’d prevented him from using it against me. Without Luke to monitor me indirectly, he wouldn’t even be able to anticipate any possible changes to the future. He’d have to fight us blind, guessing at our next move without a single hint—and he was terrible at predicting things.

When you put it that way, it seemed unlikely that he’d let Luke go completely. If nothing else, his presence would limit our options going forward.

“Do you think it’s all right to leave Luke be for the time being, then?”

“Yes. But be on your guard. When the Man-God sees no further use for a disciple, he’ll often spur them to act in reckless, absurd ways.”

“Yeah... I guess so.”

One time, he even threw this whimpering sad sack up against the Dragon God himself...

“If he takes any dramatic action, kill him.”

“...Before it comes to that, I’d like to try reaching out to him. At least once.”

“What do you suggest discussing with him?”

“I want to ask him if the Man-God’s speaking to him, and find out what advice he was given. If possible, I’d try to convince him not to trust the Man-God... maybe even get him to act as a sort of double-agent for us.”

“Hmm...”

I didn’t feel too optimistic about my chances. Luke clearly thought I was suspicious. The Man-God had probably told him something about my intentions. I almost certainly hadn’t built up enough trust with Luke to convince him to take my word for all this. We weren’t exactly friends or anything, you know?

“...I don’t think it will accomplish anything, but feel free to try.”

Okay, at least I got permission. Now it was just a matter of finding the right moment to take my shot. Hopefully this wouldn’t backfire on my spectacularly.

“For the moment, things are going smoothly enough. The Man-God hasn’t been able to disrupt our plans efficiently. Keep it up, Rudeus.”

“Yes, sir!”

With our second meeting at an end, I bowed to Orsted and hurried back through the woods.

Things are going smoothly enough.

That was true, now that I thought about it. The plan had always been to fight Auber at the Red Wyrm’s Whiskers, then join up with Triss. There had been some unexpected details and minor complications, but nothing severe enough to knock us totally off-track. I had reason to be confident.

I understood all that on some level. Still, I didn't *feel* confident at the moment. Things were going so well that I was actually getting anxious. I could sense some kind of danger, but it felt like it was hiding somewhere just outside my field of view. The whole thing with Luke was part of it, probably.

Orsted didn't seem concerned at all. Maybe that was just because he hadn't actually seen everything I had today. Maybe he could sense something a little off as well, but wasn't worried by it. Or maybe I was just overthinking things. I wished I had some idea what was going on in Orsted's head.

There weren't any *major* problems at the moment, so we were staying put. I could understand that. Thrashing around blindly only made matters worse, most of the time. Back in my old world, people used to say "it's better to try and fail than to fail because you didn't try." But that only applies when doing nothing *guarantees* failure. Sometimes, maintaining the status quo is the best possible choice.

I didn't want to fail, of course. I didn't want to regret my choices. And with that goal in mind, there *were* a few things I wanted to try.

It felt worth risking a more proactive, open approach with Ariel and Luke. In particular, I wanted to approach Luke when the moment seemed right. I hadn't decided exactly what I was going to say to him yet, and it might just make the situation worse. But I still felt the need to tell him exactly how dangerous the Man-God really was.

It might not be the right call. I wanted to do it anyway.

"..."

I made my way back to camp with these thoughts running through my mind,. All I had left to do tonight was to pop out of the woods and inform the others I hadn't spotted any danger in the area.

Sylphie and Cleane were sharing my shift tonight. I'd left them by the fire less than thirty minutes ago. But as I approached, I found that there were *three* figures waiting for me now.

Had somebody woken up in the middle of the night? If a monster had attacked in my absence, Eris or Ghislaine might have gotten up to help.

The third figure sitting by the fire wasn't bulky, but they were a bit taller than Sylphie with her small, slender silhouette, and about the same size as Cleane. The size of an average woman, in other words. Eris was noticeably taller than that, so it couldn't be her.

Who did that leave? Ellemoi? I had no idea why she'd be awake.

As I drew closer, one of the three silhouettes rose to its feet.
"It's a lovely night. Don't you agree, Rudeus?"

It was Princess Ariel. She was facing me now; the fire behind her cast her shapely features in shadow. Sylphie and Cleane looked on, their expressions troubled.

"Would you care to join me for a walk?"

As Ariel spoke those words, I could just make out the bold smile on her face.

Chapter 4: Ariel's Choice

ARIEL AND I walked together in the moonlight, making our way between the trees.

It was just the two of us. Sylphie, her attendants, and Luke were nowhere to be seen.

Ariel carried a torch herself, and led the way. If she kept pressing ahead like this, we were going to end up back at the spot where I'd spoken to Orsted.

"I've been meaning to have a private conversation with you ever since we set off on this journey, Rudeus." Sylphie and Cleane had wanted to come along, but Ariel had stopped them. Explaining that we had "important matters" to discuss, she'd led me back into the forest.

I wasn't sure what this moonlit rendezvous was about, honestly. Presumably, I wasn't escorting her to the toilet. Some people might get off on having others watch them do their business, but I didn't see any reason why she'd pick me for that role.

We'd been walking for about five minutes when Ariel finally paused and turned to face me. I guess she felt we'd come far enough from the campfire now.

"It seems that you value your secrecy, so I decided to arrange things in this way."

This probably wasn't the time to crack any dumb jokes. From the sound of things, Ariel really did have something important to discuss with me.

"...What did you want to discuss with me, Princess Ariel?"

I had a general idea what this was about, but it felt safer not to jump to any conclusions.

Still smiling boldly, Ariel reached out and took my chin in her fingers. "Try to be patient. The night's still young."

Uhm, could we make a no-touching rule, please?

"I guess it might be, but I'd prefer to sleep for most of it."

"Oh, don't be such a stiff. I want this to be a more *casual* conversation."

Ariel withdrew her hand and sat down on a nearby tree root. Just as a precaution, I decided to activate my Eye of Foresight. It wasn't that I expected Ariel to do anything. I just couldn't risk anything unexpected happening to her.

"I must say... Sylphie and Eris certainly get along nicely, don't they?"

Had she really brought me out here to talk about this? Probably not. She was just trying to break the ice, surely.

"...I suppose you're right. At first I was afraid they'd fight more frequently, but they seem to genuinely like each other."

In all honesty, I'd half-expected Eris' addition to the family to transform our house into a chaotic battleground. I was worried she would clash with Sylphie and Roxy on a regular basis. To my surprise, though, she hadn't gotten into a single *real* fight with any other members of the family.

"You know, when you went off to patrol the area the other night, they were chatting with each other as they lay in bed."

"Oh yeah? What about?"

"Eris was grumbling that everyone should just stop arguing and do exactly what you say. Sylphie tried to convince her that even you make mistakes at times, and they needed to be ready to step in and support you."

It was nice to be trusted, of course, but Eris seriously gave me way too much credit. Sylphie was always trying to help me out in subtle ways behind the scenes, and I really appreciated that.

I had to assume they were both uneasy about my decision to join forces with Orsted. But so far, they were following my lead without a word of complaint.

"They're like polar opposites, aren't they?" Ariel continued. "Eris throws herself to the frontlines to fight your enemies, and Sylphie stays behind to support you in other ways..."

"I'm very lucky to have them around," I said. "They both complement some of my glaring weaknesses."

My affection for them had developed out of gratitude. They'd both done so much for me, and I wouldn't forget it as long as I lived.

"The amusing part, to me at least, is how Sylphie treats Eris like a little sister."

"Uhm... a little sister?"

"A rather impulsive one, in need of scolding. Eris seems to accept that role herself. She tends to do what Sylphie tells her, although a bit begrudgingly."

Huh. I hadn't noticed myself, to be honest. Now that I thought about it, though... I hadn't spent that much time talking with either of them recently. Maybe I was getting tunnel vision again. Once I saw that Eris was adapting to our family, I'd figured that I didn't need to keep too close an eye on her. But it was only going well because Sylphie had been stepping in to look after her.

"It's funny, don't you think?" said Ariel with a smile. "Sylphie's the younger *and* smaller one, but somehow she's the big sister."

"You're very perceptive, Your Highness."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that. I just have fewer things to keep my eye on than you do. And fewer matters on my mind."

Ariel chose this moment to shoot me a look that could only be described as seductive.

Okay, I could do without the flirting, if you don't mind...

"Now then... I know you're an attentive man yourself, Rudeus. Your gaze is constantly in motion, and your thoughts are sometimes occupied with things that can't be seen at all."

Ariel's tone had taken a turn for the theatrical, but she was staring me right in the eyes now. Apparently we were coming to the real topic of this conversation.

"And so, there's something I'd like to ask you. What are your thoughts on Luke?"

Luke? Wait, Luke? This isn't about Orsted?

"Well... I'm not sure what to say, exactly..." Hmm. What answer was she looking for here?

"This is a bad habit of yours, Rudeus."

"What?"

"You're trying to figure out what I want to hear, aren't you? Granted, that's a reasonable approach under certain circumstances, but you don't need to take it with me. Not here. Not now."

Was that really a "habit" of mine? I didn't *feel* like it was... but when I looked back, it was something I'd been doing a lot of lately. When I spoke with Orsted or the Man-God, at least.

No, it was worse than that, wasn't it? I was doing it with my own family, too.

"In all honesty," said Ariel flatly, "I think that Luke has betrayed us."

Wow. That was unexpected. It must have been that argument around the campfire that did it.

"I haven't breathed a word of this to Sylphie or the others, though."

Yeah, no surprise there. I was still kind of shocked she'd even reached this conclusion so quickly.

"...I thought you trusted Luke a little more than that, Your Highness."

They wrapped things up so neatly at the end there, I'd assumed Ariel had reaffirmed her faith in Luke. It *felt* like she'd decided that he wasn't capable of betraying her, any more than Sylphie or her two attendants were.

"I do trust him," Ariel said.

"..."

"Luke has no reason to betray me. And he could have done so at a much earlier stage, if he so desired. It would be easy enough for him to kill me in my sleep."

"...So why suspect him?"

"Despite his loyalty, he could still be *coerced* into betraying me somehow," said Ariel quietly. "For example... Luke takes great pride in his family and its history. Perhaps they took his loved ones hostage."

The idea hadn't occurred to me before. But it could explain his actions so far, even if he wasn't being directly manipulated by the Man-God. Let's say Darius kidnapped his family and convinced him to accept some kind of deal. Then he went ahead and sent the Notos Greyrat soldiers after us, breaking his word to Luke somehow. That could explain both Luke's odd behavior and his shock at finding those troops among our enemies.

Since that conversation, Luke had kept oddly quiet. Maybe he was trying to decide whether to rejoin Ariel's side or continue following Darius' orders. That was probably what it looked like to the princess, at least.

"And so, I'm asking for your opinion," Ariel continued. "You agreed to join my cause quite recently, and rather suddenly. Perhaps you know certain things I don't?"

It sounded like she might have her doubts about me, as well. That was understandable, considering the way Luke was talking about me. Was she suggesting I might have played some part in manipulating him?

"I have a question of my own, if you don't mind. Why are we talking about this out here, alone in the woods? I could assassinate you out here if I really was your enemy."

"Yes, I'm sure you could manage that easily enough. But if I've misjudged you that completely, I'd only have myself to blame."

Hmm. This princess had some guts, clearly.

Then again, it wasn't like there was any chance I was actually going to betray her. There were all sorts of obvious reasons why I wouldn't, really. She was probably just playing mind games with me.

"...I don't believe Luke has betrayed you, exactly. I think he's just being...misled."

"By whom?"

Well, that's a tricky question. Was it wise for me to tell her about the Man-God at this point? It would certainly make things simpler if I could explain the whole truth, but...

Wait. What if *Ariel* was one of his disciples? What if that was the whole reason she was having this conversation with me? Orsted didn't seem to think it was a possibility, but you never know...

Calm down, damn it.

What are the risks of telling her the truth? What are the benefits? Let's start there...

“Ah, my apologies,” said Ariel. “I’m putting you in a difficult position. I’m sure you would have shared this information already, if you were at liberty to do so.”

I blinked in surprise at that. Ariel wasn’t done yet, however.

“And so, I’d like to ask you to introduce me.”

It was hard to see her face in the darkness, but the smile on her face looked warm and genuine.

“I want to see the man who controls you from the shadows. That is to say, the Dragon God Orsted.”

“Huh?!”

Hold on, what?

My line of thought had been derailed completely. I had no idea what to make of this.

Why had she brought up Orsted? Weren’t we talking about Luke a moment ago?

“...How did you know?”

“It was obvious from the moment he had you lead us to the Library Labyrinth. The timing of that was simply too convenient.”

“...”

“At the moment, my main concern is determining *whose side* Orsted is on.”

Uh. She was talking about the conflict between her and Grabel, right? Or was she talking about his loyalties in general? It was getting hard to decipher all these vague hints and insinuations. Princess Ariel was usually so clear and to the point, too...

“What are you planning to do once you determine that?” I asked.

"If he's on the *right* side, I plan to welcome his support," said Ariel. "No matter how horrifying he might be, I'm prepared to tolerate him."

"That's easier said than done, you know."

"I'm royalty. A princess. We know how to maintain our composure around those we fear or loathe. It shouldn't be an issue."

Well, if you say so. I feel like Orsted's curse is more powerful than you think, though.

"Okay. What if he's on the wrong side?"

"Then I'll pull him to the other," Ariel replied confidently.

Wow. She really believes she can do that, doesn't she?

"He's somewhere close by at present, isn't he? Or perhaps you've been communicating with him by messenger?"

I had a tough call on my hands with this one. It was hard to say if I could even make this decision on my own. Ariel seemed to think she could endure Orsted's curse, but I knew just how potent its effects were. Anyone who got a good look instantly classified him as an enemy. She might end up putting *me* in that category, too.

That said, if I flat-out refused her proposal, it would basically announce that we had something to hide.

This felt more complicated than it needed to be. We had no intention of interfering with Ariel's plans to seize the throne. The Man-God was the one who wanted her to fail, and our main goal was to stop *his* plans.

Still, it wasn't going to be easy to explain all that to her. Hmm...

"There's no need to overthink this, Rudeus."

The voice had come from somewhere behind me.

Startled, I turned to find a golden-eyed, silver-haired demon lurking in the woods. By which I mean Orsted, of course.

“If Ariel Anemoi Asura wishes to speak with me, I would not refuse her.”

Orsted’s sharp, intense gaze focused on Ariel’s face. She reacted as if she’d been hit with a jolt of electricity. Her eyes opened wide, her legs trembled violently...and a small puddle began to form at her feet.

“Ah... ah...”

There was sheer terror on her face. It was the expression of someone trapped in a living nightmare.

Oh boy, this does not look good. I guess I’m definitely going to be the traitor now...

“Aaah...”

In the next moment, however, a look of ecstasy suddenly spread over Ariel’s face. She was...pretty clearly feeling pleasure now. Interesting.

Huh. I guess this might work out after all.

Ariel managed to regain her composure after a little while. As of this moment, she appeared totally unruffled. You’d never know anything had happened in the first place.

I’d washed her dirty pants and underwear with my water magic, then dried them out quickly with my original spell “Steam Dry,” a combination of wind and fire magic. It worked almost instantly, but it wasn’t good for most fabrics, so Aisha had angrily forbidden me from using it at home. This was kind of an emergency, though.

I’d lived for many years at this point, but I’d never expected to see the day where I’d be washing the underwear of a princess. In this world, the expensive stuff seemed mostly to be made of silk. Ariel

wrapped herself in my robe while I was taking care of all this. It was a good thing it was nice and long.

Right now, Ariel had put her clean clothes back on, and seemed to have forgotten all about the incident. And I was wearing a robe that a half-naked princess had been using just a few minutes earlier. It smelled kind of nice...

Whoops. Not the time to be getting all excited.

There hadn't been any time for "fun" in the last few days, so my horny meter was getting dangerously full. I'd have to deal with that later.

Orsted was waiting nearby with an awkward expression. Now that the princess was ready, she turned to face him once again.

"I do apologize for that unfortunate display, Lord Orsted."

"It's all right."

Ariel still looked kind of pale, but I couldn't see any terror in her eyes now.

"..."

"Please, you don't have to glower at me like that..."

"This is what my face always looks like, I'm afraid."

"Ah, I see. So this is another effect of your curse, then?"

"Correct."

I had to wonder why Orsted had shown up like that in the first place. Well. The boss could make his own decisions. At this point, I should just keep my mouth shut and see how things played out.

"I see. I've met a number of both Blessed Children and their Cursed counterparts... but I can tell that your affliction is far more powerful than most."

"Indeed. But it seems you know some way to resist its influence."

“I am a member of the Asuran royal family. We’re taught how to suppress our more negative emotions.”

“That doesn’t mean that you trust me, either. Not in any real sense.”

“True enough. But that’s exactly why I wanted to speak with you like this.”

So far, this was like two boxers trying to size each other up with a few light jabs. It was starting to make me feel kind of uneasy. Still, it was probably important for me to listen closely to everything they were saying. That pleasant smell wafting from my robe was a *little* bit distracting, but I needed to focus.

“I’ll get straight to the point. Why are you assisting me, Lord Orsted?”

“Because my sworn enemy is pulling Darius’ strings.”

“Hmm? Do you... mean my brother, Prince Grabel?”

“No.”

“Who is it, then?”

Okay, here we go. Right back to the awkward question. What’s the call, boss?

“An evil thing who styles himself as the god of men. His name is Man-God.”

Oh wow, he actually went for it. Tossed out the whole name and everything. How much was he planning to tell her, anyway? It still felt *possible* that she might turn against us at some point...

“The Man-God? Isn’t that one of the creator gods from ancient myth?”

“I can’t say if he’s one and the same, but he has taken that name, at least.”

“You’re telling me...that a *god* has given Darius his support? But why?”

“He wishes to see you murdered, and Grabel take the throne.”

“Err...”

Looking kind of nonplussed, Ariel turned slowly in my direction. For a moment, she just studied me in silence.

“I see. It’s certainly a bizarre story, but Rudeus’ face seems to suggest that you’re not lying.”

Am I your lie detector now?! And here I thought I had a decent poker face...

I’d have to check in with Sylphie later and see what she thought about my face. Maybe she’d call it handsome. That was always nice to hear.

“I have to wonder why this god would support my brother, however. Is Grabel simply... more deserving of the throne?”

“No. The Man-God’s motivations are purely selfish.”

“Could you... elaborate, perhaps?”

Orsted glanced over at me and frowned uncertainly for a moment, but then looked back to the princess. “Roughly one hundred years from now, the Kingdom of Asura will face an existential threat.”

Ariel blinked in surprise.

“In that moment of crisis,” Orsted continued, “the Kingdom’s response will depend on whether you or Grabel seized the throne.”

Uh, what? Hey, I don’t think you even told me about this part yet...

“Should Grabel triumph, Asura will answer the threat with military force. And if you triumph, they will respond with magic.”

“Surely neither of us will even be alive a hundred years from now,” Ariel said.

“Your policies as sovereign will guide the Kingdom down different paths. Grabel will focus on enlarging its military, and you will strengthen its magical forces instead.”

*Boss? Hey, boss? Why am I just hearing about this now, huh?
Come on, man...*

“If Asura relies upon its armies, it will fall. But if it turns to its mages, the Kingdom will endure. The Man-God wishes for Asura to be destroyed.”

Was it... possible Orsted was lying to her? Telling her a nice, convenient story to get her on our side? That didn’t seem like a great idea. Not with my face around to give the whole thing away.

“Why would the Man-God want to see Asura fall to ruin?”

“Because it will produce an individual who plays a key role in his defeat.”

“He wants to prevent this person’s birth?”

“Precisely.”

Ariel brought a hand to her chin, clearly trying to make sense of all this. After a moment, she shot an uncertain look in my direction.

Stop it! Stop looking at me! I’m not your lie detector, woman!

This time, I tried my best to keep a perfect poker face. Maybe it would help a little.

“Well. In all honesty, I’m a bit perplexed at the moment. This isn’t remotely what I expected to hear, and I can’t quite decide if I should believe you...”

Damn it. Failed again.

“You don’t have to trust me,” said Orsted in a slightly pompous tone. “I’ll tell you what you want to know regardless.”

“What are you referring to?” replied Ariel, looking somewhat surprised.

“Luke Notos Greyrat has not betrayed you. He’s simply being manipulated by the Man-God.”

Ariel’s smile disappeared. It had been her default expression for this entire conversation, but now it had vanished without a trace.

“Rudeus also suggested that might be the case. But how exactly is Luke being *manipulated*, if I may ask?”

“The Man-God is leading him down the wrong path. Promising him all the while that it’s for your benefit.”

“Luke is wiser than he might appear. I’m not sure he would be so easily deceived.”

“Even clever men are prone to trust those who tell them what they want to hear.”

Hmm. I felt like Orsted usually told me things I *didn’t* want to hear, but I did trust him. Maybe that rule wasn’t universal.

“...This is all rather difficult to believe. Do you really find this credible as well, Rudeus?”

Ariel had turned to me again. I was back on lie detector duty, apparently.

I had to admit, this was a smart strategy. If Orsted really was making up a bunch of crazy nonsense, I’d have to improvise something that sounded consistent on the spot. Any slip-ups on my part would give it all away.

Fortunately, I had a good answer to her question.

“The Man-God manipulated me for many years. He would appear in my dreams and give me suggestions about what I should do next. I gained all sorts of things from following his advice. But it was all just part of his game—he was always planning to betray me in the end. He fooled me into trusting him, and then he turned against me. In the end, he even forced me to fight Orsted. I think he’s doing something very similar to Luke right now.”

The words came out more easily than I'd expected. I even managed to keep my tone relatively neutral.

Ariel heard me out expressionlessly, then turned back to Orsted. She opened her mouth to speak, then shook her head and paused. For a long moment, she stayed silent, apparently lost in thought.

"In other words... Luke isn't working for Darius after all?"

"Correct. He serves the interests of your enemies, but he does so unknowingly. I would imagine that he remains loyal to you."

We'd taken a long detour, but ultimately this seemed to be the thing Ariel cared about the most. It mattered more to her than the truth of Orsted's story, even.

"...It's quite a relief to hear that."

"You believe the things I've told you, then?" Orsted asked.

"Under ordinary circumstances, your story would have sounded ridiculous. However, it does seem consistent with my own observations. It explains why Rudeus was glancing in Luke's direction so frequently, for example..."

Huh? Was I looking at him that much?

"To be frank, your timing was suspiciously perfect. But I've decided to accept the risk of trusting you."

As she spoke those words, Ariel had turned her eyes in my direction. Maybe she'd chosen to trust me, if not Orsted? The idea was flattering, but it also concerned me a little.

"Tell me, does this Man-God have anyone else under his control?"

"He's likely using Darius as well."

"That does seem like a logical choice. Is there anyone else?"

"The odds are that his third disciple is either the North Emperor Auber or the Water God Reida. But it's hard to say for certain."

“Are there only three of these...disciples, then?”

“Correct. No more at any given time.”

“I see,” said Ariel with a slight nod. “So you and Rudeus are here to fight off these three disciples, and interfere with the Man-God’s plans. Is that correct?”

“It is. You’re quite quick-witted, I must say.”

“Thank you. I do consider myself relatively clever.”

There was a hint of real pride in Ariel’s voice, but she still hadn’t cracked a smile. It felt like her face was stuck on a blank expression.

“Now then, Lord Orsted, I have a proposal.”

“Oh?”

“Since it seems we share the same objective, I’d like you to consider me your...subordinate. If you give you me orders, I’ll follow them.”

“...I doubt your companions would accept that.”

“I see no need to tell them. They can’t accuse me of selling my soul to the devil if they don’t know it even happened.”

“...”

Oh. He’s a little hurt that she called him the devil, huh?

“I’m willing to use any means at my disposal to ensure our victory,” said Ariel. “I want as many powerful allies as I can find.”

“You’re not concerned I might betray you in the end?”

“I’m not foolish enough to throw away my opportunities to avoid all risk.”

That all sounded impressive enough, but I got the sense that Ariel thought she was swearing allegiance to some evil demon king. I’d felt the same way when I kneeled to Orsted. As it turned out, though, the Dragon God Corporation was a legitimate business with

excellent benefits and reasonable deadlines. The CEO *did* look like an evil bastard, but he treated his employees pretty well.

“One last thing, Lord Orsted... For the time being, I’d like you to place the problem of Luke in my hands.”

“Why?”

“Rudeus can focus his entire attention on our battle against the Man-God’s disciples, while I devote my attention to handling Luke and the Asuran nobility. Dividing our responsibilities should allow us to use our time more efficiently.”

“...Very well. I’ll let you deal with Luke for now. Win him over if it’s possible, and kill him if it isn’t.”

“So be it. Thank you, Lord Orsted.”

With those words, Ariel kneeled before her new superior. He responded with a simple nod, his face as stern as ever.

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt this...baffled? Perplexed? Hmm. Maybe *befuddled* was the word. All of a sudden, Ariel had sworn allegiance to Orsted. From now on, we’d be sharing our plans and working toward the same goals. I had the Second Princess of Asura as a *coworker*.

“I hope you’ll keep this a secret from Sylphie and the others, Rudeus.”

“Of course. I have to ask, though... are you *sure* about all this?”

“Yes. I feel profoundly relieved, to be honest. And I’m not talking about the condition of my bladder.”

Judging from the energized expression on her face, she really meant that. I wasn’t sure what to say.

“I suppose you and I are *truly* allies now, Rudeus. At long last.”

“I suppose we are.”

To be honest, I still felt a little uneasy about the details of this arrangement. But Orsted had made the call, and I had to respect that.

“There’s just one thing, Your Highness...”

“Yes? What is it?”

“I think I should make this clear in advance. Luke’s your responsibility now, but if I think he’s actively trying to harm Sylphie or Eris, I’ll step in and take him out.”

“...You won’t respect Orsted’s decision, in other words?”

“The entire reason I’m working for Orsted is to protect my family.”

It seemed best to get this out in the open as a precaution. That said, Ariel seemed very confident that she could handle the situation with Luke. There was no telling how things might play out, but I was willing to leave it in her hands for now. She certainly had a much better chance than me of talking some sense into the guy.

“I understand completely, Rudeus. And incidentally, I’m looking forward to working with you.”

“Glad to have you on our side.”

Just like that, Orsted Incorporated had secured its second official employee.

It probably goes without saying, but Sylphie was none too pleased when the two of us strolled back into camp looking friendlier than before.

Chapter 5: Tristina

THE NEXT DAY, we made our way into the bandits' territory.

No one seemed to be pursuing us. Auber and his soldiers hadn't followed our trail. They were probably waiting for us at the end of the road, on the assumption that we'd need to pass through the checkpoint eventually.

Ordinarily, the Man-God could have anticipated our alternate strategy. But...

I glanced down at the bracelet on my left arm, engraved with the crest of the Dragon God. Thanks to this thing, the Man-God was incapable of foreseeing any changes to the future caused directly by my actions. He shouldn't *know* that we'd taken a different route, even now.

That said, there was still a risk he'd just... figure it out. If he remembered my detailed description of that diary from the future, he might be able to put the pieces together.

But from what Orsted told me, the Man-God had been reliant on his foresight for so long that he wasn't much good at *speculating* about the future. He didn't seem the type to memorize every little thing people told him, either. I doubted he could recall the minor details from that diary at this point.

I'd been trudging forward for a while, mulling all this over, when I felt the direction of the wind abruptly shift.

"Stop!" said Ghislaine, grabbing my shoulder from behind.
"They're here."

Eris tried to step past me to the front of our line, but I reached out and held her back. With her in the front, we'd end up "negotiating" with our fists.

Eris backed down easily enough. But I noticed she was looking off to the sides, not toward the front.

"They have us surrounded," Ghislaine said. "What now? We still have a chance to break through."

"Don't you remember the plan? I'm going to negotiate with them."

"...Right. I'll guard the princess, then."

Ghislaine dropped to the rear of our group without another word. When I glanced backwards, I saw her quietly discussing something with Sylphie and the others. My eyes met Ariel's for a moment; she nodded meaningfully.

So far, the princess was acting as if last night had never happened. She'd claimed that she could handle Luke and the Asuran nobility on her own, but I wasn't sure what she had in mind yet. *I had* noticed her talking quietly with Luke as we walked, though... hopefully it would work out for the best. At the end of the day, Orsted had agreed to let her deal with Luke. I was planning to respect that.

I stood quietly at the front of our group, waiting for the bandits to call out to us. My rule of thumb was that it never hurt to take the initiative by introducing yourself, but that could wait until they decided to show themselves.

"...Hmph."

Eris was lurking right behind me, gazing restlessly around the area. Every now and then, dark shapes moved through the trees; she seemed to be watching them. I felt like she'd been sticking very close to me today... well, ever since the ambush yesterday. Auber had popped up right behind me in that fight. Maybe she was worried something similar might happen again.

After a minute or two had passed, Eris' gaze stopped roving. It seemed the bandits had completed their encirclement of our group.

"There's five of them or so, I think," she whispered. "We could handle it."

Huh. Did she pick up an enemy radar skill at some point?

Just then, the bushes right ahead of us rustled, and a man pushed his way out into the open. Others showed themselves as well, stepping out from behind trees, or moving forward on the branches on which they perched.

Five... ten... uh, Eris, honey? There's like... twenty of them, at least. That estimate was a little bit on the low side, don't you think?

When I glanced in her direction, Eris avoided my gaze.

The man who'd stepped out in front of us had a stubbly beard, a fur vest, and a machete at his hip. Your classic bandit look, basically. He carried an unlit torch in one hand.

He took another step forward, and loudly said: "What says the echo in reply?"

I was ready for this, of course. Orsted had taught me all their code words in advance. "Rabbit entrails, and the chirping of a thrush."

The meaning of this exchange was simple enough. The man had asked *What's your business with us?* And I'd replied *We want to cross the border, and speak with a member of your band.* There were all sort of other codes: "nurturing fox" for human trafficking, "a feline errand" to have someone in Asura located, and "awakened bear" to arrange for the disappearance of someone passing through the Red Wyrm's Whiskers, among others. If anyone happened to blunder into the bandits' territory without knowing all this in advance, the fine people currently surrounding us would simply strip them of their valuables and possibly their lives.

"The hell...?" Mr. Bandit studied me dubiously for a long while before continuing. "What's the thrush's chick?"

"The striped acorn." This was the codename for Triss.

Mr. Bandit considered my reply, looking even more confused than before, but then shrugged and raised a hand; the bandits lurking around us melted quietly back into the forest. “Follow me,” he said curtly, lighting his torch.

I turned back to give the *OK* sign to the rest of our party. Ariel and the others seemed to exhale in relief.

As I was coming back around, my gaze met Eris’. For some reason, her eyes were sparkling with excitement. “That was awesome, Rudeus!”

I honestly wasn’t sure what was *awesome* about knowing a couple codewords, but hey, whatever. “Well, let’s go.”

“Right!”

Our party pushed on deeper into the forest, following our bandit guide closely.

The man eventually took us to a lone cabin in the middle of the woods. There was an enclosed area for our horses outside, and the interior was large enough to include a living room, bedroom, and storage space. The bedroom was equipped with a number of three-level bunkbeds. The sheets and blankets looked damp, and they were probably infested with bugs, but they *were* technically beds. Overall, it felt like a slightly retrofitted woodcutter’s hut.

Mr. Bandit accepted his payment from me, then explained how this was going to work. “We’ll bring the thrush to you. The crossing’s tomorrow at dawn. Deal’s off if you wander out of here before that.” Before I could say anything in response, he’d walked back off into the woods. Hopefully he was heading back to their base to get Triss for us.

The man hadn’t asked for any details about us or our plans, even indirectly. In this line of work, I guess you didn’t pry—as long as the clients paid up, at least.

“Phew...”

After setting my bags down on the floor, I explained our next steps to the rest of the group. We would slip over the border bright and early tomorrow morning, with a woman we’d be meeting soon as our guide. And for tonight, we had to stay here. That pretty much covered it, really.

“I suppose we’ll just have to pray they don’t hand us over to Darius’ forces in the morning,” Luke replied helpfully.

I had some similar feelings myself. Things had been going so smoothly up to this point that it seemed like we were overdue for trouble. But that wasn’t really a logical line of thought, of course.

“Ah. My ambitions are shattered, and I’m reduced to a plaything for bandits. How dreadful,” said Ariel in a slightly playful tone.
“Rudeus, I do hope you’ll be kind enough to let Cleane and Ellemoi go free, at least?”

Ugh. You know as well as I do what’s really going to happen next, Princess... Come on, now you’ve got those two staring daggers at me! What did I do to deserve this slander?

“In any case, it seems we’ll have a roof over our heads tonight,” Ariel continued. “I imagine our journey across the border won’t be easy, so let’s make sure to get plenty of rest while we can.”

The others took that as their signal to get started with their preparations for the night. Ariel herself was looking visibly fatigued after our trek through the forest. She wasn’t used to hiking in rough conditions, obviously. I’d expected her two attendants to be exhausted as well, but they had a surprising amount of energy left. They were busily massaging her legs. It seemed they’d spent the last seven years trained hard for this moment.

Luke was standing at the window and keeping a close watch on the outside, but every now and then he’d shoot a probing look in my direction. Clearly, he still had his suspicions about me. Maybe the

Man-God had told him something like “there’s someone working for the enemy among your party”? That wouldn’t even be a lie, technically... although I was the *Man-God’s* enemy, not Luke’s.

Ghislaine stood quietly in a corner of the room that offered her a good view of everything at once. That was her usual position. When our eyes met, she nodded slightly. It kind of looked like a signal, but there probably wasn’t much meaning to it.

Sylphie had disappeared into the bedroom, which she was trying to clean up. I wasn’t too picky about this stuff, but would we really be sleeping on those nasty old sheets? Hmm... since we’d brought plenty of blankets and such with us, we could probably just use the mattresses.

Eris was sitting close behind me, working on her equipment. When I glanced back, I found her smirking happily while polishing her sword. It was kind of an unsettling sight, what with the weird glow the blade emitted.

Well... just have to be thankful she’s on our side, right?

As for myself, I didn’t have much to do at the moment. It would have been nice to use this time to give Orsted another update, but I wasn’t dumb enough to break the rules of our agreement with the bandits. I decided to take some time looking over the condition of my own gear.

Two hours or so passed uneventfully. It started raining at some point. Not the kind of torrential downpour you’d see in the Great Forest during its rainy season, but you could hear it pattering away on the roof of the cabin.

Ariel was sleeping. She’d passed out the moment she got into the bed Sylphie had prepared for her. Ellemoi had accompanied her into the bedroom, and Luke was standing right outside the door like some kind of gatekeeper.

Sylphie, Eris, and Cleane were talking about something in hushed voices over in the corner of the room. Every once in a while, you'd hear Sylphie or Cleane giggling, so it probably wasn't a particularly serious conversation. It was good that they were getting to relax a little, at least. You couldn't expect people to spend every minute of the day on high alert.

Ghislaine hadn't moved at all in quite some time. She was sitting on the floor close to the entrance with her eyes closed, but it didn't seem like she was actually asleep.

So, not much in way of conversation. I'd finished looking over my equipment some time ago; at the moment, I was trying to figure out what else I could do with the empty hours still ahead.

"Hm..."

But then, I saw Ghislaine's ears twitch.

"Someone's here," said Eris, rising to her feet.

She and Ghislaine both had a hand on the hilt of their swords now. The air in the cabin was suddenly thick with tension.

After a few moments, there was a knock at the door. The sound echoed throughout the entire cabin.

Ghislaine made eye contact with me, and I nodded. She moved forward and opened the door.

A hooded woman stepped inside. She was wrapped in a thick cloak of water-resistant monster hide, but it was still easy to tell that she was... well... voluptuous.

"Fuckin' hell. Couldn't you idiots open up a little faster?!"

The woman pulled off her cloak, muttering curses to no one in particular. She had light-brown hair, which was typical enough in Asura, and wore very revealing clothing, which was much *less* typical.

Wow. Are those puppies actually bigger than Eris'?

“Okay, so? Which of you wants to see me?” the woman called out, looking around the room. “I assumed some moron was gonna try and buy me for the night, but it looks like that ain’t it. Spit it out! I’m a busy woman!”



She'd spoken so loudly and intensely that her voice seemed to fill the entire cabin. Eris grimaced, and Cleane glared at her reproachfully.

Before I could say anything, Sylphie spoke up. "Uhm, I'm sorry, but we've got someone sleeping in the back. Would you mind lowering your voice?"

The woman's mood immediately took a turn for the worse. "What the hell?! You called me out here in the pouring rain, and all you've got to say is *lower your voice*?! Are you people fucking with me?! They call me Triss the Hasty for a goddamn reason, you know!"

Huh. Apparently, this *was* Triss. I'd been expecting someone a little softer-spoken.

Unfortunately, it seemed we'd gotten off on the wrong foot. Those diary entries said that she'd treated me with a lot of respect, but that was only because I'd stolen one of the Millis Church's most sacred texts. I had no real connection to Triss in this timeline. But I had discussed that issue with Orsted in advance, and we'd worked out a plan.

"Ughhh. Goddamn it, what a joke... Look, I'm in a *bad* mood right now. I lost at dice, and Donovan rubbed my face in it for hours! This new slave girl spat in my goddamn face! And then I had to run out here in the rain! Tell me what you want *right now*, or I'm leaving. I'm not in the mood for any more crap today, all right? Better luck next time!"

You know, I feel like most of that isn't actually our fault, miss...

I wanted to get to the point, of course, but we clearly needed to get her calmed down first.

As I was trying to find the right words, though, Luke stepped smoothly forward. Taking Triss by the hand, he wiped the water from her forehead with his handkerchief. "Our sincere apologies for the abrupt summons, miss. Please forgive us if you can. We know your

time is precious, but we ask only that you consider what we have to say.”

Wow, okay. That felt seriously fake...

Triss just stared at Luke for a moment with her mouth hanging open. But then a blush spread across her face, and she lowered her gaze from his. “Uh, well... if you say so, I guess I’ll hear you out, at least...”

Somehow, it had actually worked. Never underestimate the power of a pretty face.

Luke shot a meaningful glance back in my direction. The rest was up to me now.

“Uh, hey,” said Triss as he released her hand. “Before we talk, would you mind... telling me your name?”

“...I’m Luke.”

Luke chose to omit his family name entirely. He then stepped back into the group without another word. Triss mumbled his name to herself with a dreamy expression—

Wait, no. Is that suspicion on her face? It looked like the name rang a bell, for some reason.

But in any case, it was time for me to step up and take control of this conversation. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Triss,” I said, offering her my best and brightest smile.

“Who the hell are you?” she replied, her dubious expression giving way to an outright scowl. It was the kind of face you might make at a particularly shady door-to-door salesman. Apparently I still wasn’t very good at the whole ‘smiling’ thing. I’d have to make some time to practice one of these days. Maybe I could get an expert to train me... Aisha came to mind.

Anyway. Time enough for all that later. “My name’s Rudeus,” I said, bowing my head politely.

Triss looked me over slowly from head to toe, then raised an eyebrow. “Rudeus? I feel like I’ve heard that one before... wait a second.”

Clearly, she’d pulled something out of her memory. Both her eyebrows were raised now, and she seemed genuinely startled.

“Are you *Quagmire*?”

Oh. They’ve heard of me all the way out here?

“What’s the most vicious mage in the Magic City of Sharia doing all the way out here...?”

Uh, vicious? What kind of rumors were going around about me, exactly?

As I scrambled for a reply, we were interrupted by a sharp metallic *ting*. Triss shut her mouth instantly, and the skin on my back began to crawl.

Ting. Ting.

The sounds came at a steady rhythm now. I looked in their direction, and I found Eris standing in a corner of the room, her eyes cold and focused, flicking her finger against the pommel of her sword.

It was something like a warning, or maybe just a sign of her displeasure. Like the sound a rattlesnake would make when you blundered into its territory. A physical shiver ran through me, from the base of my spine to my head.

“Uh, sorry.”

I wasn’t the only one who was shaking. I could see Triss’ shoulders quivering as well.

“I’m not, er... trying to pry into your business or anything, okay?”

The words seemed to be directed more at Eris than at me. She acknowledged the apology with a quiet snort, and finally stopped flicking her sword.

God, that girl is scary sometimes.

“It’s just, you need information to survive in this line of work,” Triss continued. “We know the names and faces of most, well... dangerous people.”

“I’m really not *that* dangerous, for the record,” I said.

“Yeah, sure. Don’t worry, I get it. You’re just some random guy named Rudeus, not that famous mage, right? That lady over there isn’t the Berserker Sword King. And that beastfolk woman isn’t the Black Wolf, either. Sound good?”

“...Yes, let’s go with that.”

Maybe giving her my real name had been a mistake. It was surprising that she even knew about Eris, though. Was there any chance she might be an apostle of the Man-God?

...Nah, that seemed *very* unlikely. She’d probably heard a few rumors about Quagmire Rudeus, and one of them must have mentioned that I was working with the Black Wolf and the Berserker Sword King. I couldn’t jump right to blaming Man-God for anything I didn’t understand. It was going to throw my judgment off.

“All right then, Random Rudeus. Mind telling me what business you have with Triss the border-hopping thug?”

It was finally time to broach the main topic.

In the long run, we wanted Triss to expose Darius’ misdeeds and help us bring him down. But if I just came out and *said* that, it was hard to imagine she’d react well. I couldn’t just start off by asking her “You’re Tristina Purplehorse, a former member of the Asuran nobility, correct?” This woman knew how vicious the world of Asuran

politics could be. We could explain our situation to her, but if she didn't see any chance of victory, she wouldn't get involved.

We had to take this one step at a time. First of all, we needed to make friends with Triss. Then, during our journey to the south, I could drop some hints about our plan to defeat Darius. Later on, I might mention how helpful it would be to find some way of damaging his reputation—such as locating one of the high-born girls he regularly enslaved. At that point, there was a good chance she'd volunteer immediately. And if not, I could drop the pretense and pressure her to help us out.

So, for the moment...

"Excuse me. Are you, by any chance... Tristina Purplehorse?"

A voice from the back of the room knocked all the words out of my mouth.

I turned slowly to face the beautiful blond-haired woman standing behind the rest of us. It was Ariel, of course. Her hair was a little messier than usual—she'd probably just woken up—but her voice was as clear and charming as always.

Triss stared across the room at her, wide-eyed with surprise.
"Wh... Why do you know that name?"

"Oh, it really *is* you. Don't you remember me? The two of us met just once, at my fifth birthday party."

I'd considered intervening, but Ariel gestured with her hand and gave me a quick wink. From the looks of things, she had a plan.

"P-Princess Ariel?!" Triss said, looking utterly stunned. For a long moment, she seemed to be studying Ariel's features closely, perhaps comparing them to her memories—and then she froze entirely, her

mouth hanging slightly open. “Why... But... What are you *doing* here, Your Highness...?”

Her legs trembling, Triss kneeled on the wooden floor. The princess pushed past me and stood before her.

“I received word that my father is deathly ill, and attempted to return to Asura,” Ariel said with a self-effacing smile. “But it seems my elder brother isn’t in an especially welcoming mood.”

Uhm, is it really a good idea to just throw that out there? It certainly didn’t *seem* that way to a sneaky, careful guy like me... but on second thought, that kind of openness was probably the best way to earn real trust.

“Oh, I get it. So that’s why you came to us, to smuggle you across the border...”

Triss nodded thoughtfully. I got the feeling that she’d already heard about the recent battle in the forest, if not the specific details.

“But what about you, Tristina? What are *you* doing in a place like this? The last I heard, you’d gone missing without a trace...”

“Uhm, well...” Triss hesitated for a moment; but looking up into Ariel’s eyes, she seemed to find a reason to continue. “It’s a long story, but—”

From that point on, everything moved along quickly and easily. As I turned out, I didn’t need to say a single word. Triss poured out her whole miserable life story to Ariel like a sinner at confession.

Darius had kidnapped her at a young age, and kept her as a sex slave for years. Eventually, he’d sold her to this bandit gang. For a time, she’d been the leader’s woman, but he’d trained her as a bandit on a whim. And when a new boss took over, she gained her freedom as a member of the band. There were all sorts of strange

and ugly details in the story, but Triss told it calmly, without any tears or smiles.

Princess Ariel, on the other hand, was crying openly for most of it. And her tears looked absolutely genuine. With the last of them still running down her face, she made Triss a promise: "I can't truly understand your suffering, but I guarantee I'll give the man who did this to you his rightful punishment." Then she asked Triss to help our cause by testifying to what Darius had done to her.

It was a remarkably convincing act.

Still, Triss was hesitant to agree. The Kingdom of Asura was very powerful, and Darius was a sly and vicious man. She insisted that we stood no chance of victory. Ariel, in turn, told her that this wasn't true. She named her allies: Sylphie, Eris, Ghislaine, me, and Perugius himself, and argued we were capable of overcoming Darius and winning her the throne.

Triss agonized over her decision for a whole hour. But after that painful period of silence, she finally nodded. She swore an oath right then and there to escort Princess Ariel safely to the capital, and help her bring down Darius.

Ariel had gained herself another loyal follower in no time at all. I hadn't contributed in the slightest. While I sat on my hands, the princess' earnest words and skillful arguments had won Triss over, heart and soul.

This goal had been brought up during our meeting with Orsted the previous night. But we hadn't come up with a detailed plan to achieve it. Ariel had probably just sprung into action when she saw how slow and clunky my own plan was.

The princess was one seriously impressive woman. No wonder she was confident she could win over the entire Asuran nobility on her own.

I'd just have to focus on the things that only I could do.

Chapter 6: On the Road

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, we gathered all our things together and set out from the cabin. The sun hadn't yet risen, and the woods were dark and silent.

"Okay then, follow me."

Triss led our party as we made our way deeper into the forest. Without the sun as a guide, it was hard to tell which direction we were going, but the ground slanted upward before of us, so we were probably moving toward the mountains. We moved quietly, without any unnecessary chatter.

The forest was dense here, and it seemed to go on forever. But then, we pushed our way through one last dense patch of brush...

"Ooh."

...and found ourselves looking down at a sizable lake, with the forest suddenly behind us.

Some people might have called it a *pond*, since it didn't look very deep, but *lake* somehow felt more appropriate. It was semicircular, surrounded on all sides by tall cliffs and forests, and its surface was a brilliant shade of blue. From the looks of things, it wasn't part of a river system; maybe the water came from underground.

"This wasn't even on our map," I murmured.

"Yeah, it's positioned so you can't see it from a distance," said Triss. "And this is all our turf, so you won't see it on *any* maps."

"Hmm..."

We proceeded to follow the curve of the lake to the cliff on the far side. At first glance, it looked like a sheer, almost featureless rock face right at the water's edge. But a single stone tablet stood on the

ground nearby. When Triss performed some sort of incantation in front of it, part of the cliff melted away, and a cave appeared before our eyes.

"This way," she called. "It's easy to slip and fall in here, so watch your step."

She led the way once again, stepping carefully into the lake, which continued into the cliffside cave. Apparently, the water was very shallow here. It only came up to about her knees.

"Come on, Rudeus!" said Eris, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "Let's go!"

Even at twenty, she hadn't lost any of her enthusiasm for adventure. She was clearly itching to explore this mysterious hidden cavern. But I wasn't much better, in my own way. I'd never grown out of my love for used underwear.

"Just don't move so fast that you make the horse slip in the water, okay?"

"Yeah, I know!"

With a smile that suggested my warning had gone in one ear and out the other, Eris stepped post-haste into the water, pulling our horse Matsukaze along. Matsukaze was reluctant to wade into the lake and resisted her, but she managed to drag him in pretty quick. It was like watching a kappa at work.

Hmm... Eris would probably be good at sumo wrestling. Wonder if she likes cucumbers, though? I don't think she has many favorite foods, but you never know...

"We should try to keep up, Rudy," said Sylphie.

"Right."

With Eris at the head of our group, we formed a single file and led our horses carefully into the water. It was surprisingly chilly, given the time of year. I didn't even want to think what it would feel

like wading through this in the winter. Wouldn't horses die from exposure? Hmm... the lake would probably freeze solid, actually. That might actually make the trip easier.

Fortunately, the cave led upwards from the entrance, so we were out of the water before too long.

"All right then," said Triss. "Follow me, and try not to fall too far behind. You don't want to get lost in here, trust me." With her torch blazing in one hand, she confidently set off deeper into the gloomy cavern. I'd taken a moment earlier to summon a lamplight spirit for some additional illumination.

Glancing behind me to make sure the others were following, I made eye contact with Princess Ariel, who was contemplating her drenched pants with a troubled expression.

"Let's wait until later to get those dried out, Your Highness."

"Oh, yes, of course," said Ariel, somehow managing a cheerful smile.

Last night, most of our party had convinced themselves that it was pure coincidence Triss and Ariel knew each other. They were all very impressed with the princess for winning her over on the "spur of the moment"—with the possible exception of Eris, who'd gotten a bit cranky over all the admiring gazes at Ariel.

That aside... it was kind of nice to have the princess on my side now. It seemed like she was serious about supporting me.

I'd been studying Ariel's face for a long moment when Sylphie spoke up from beside me. "Uhm, Rudy?"

"What is it, Sylphie, my beloved wife?"

"Don't stare at Princess Ariel too much, or I'm going to pull your ears."

"Understood, dear. You want me staring at you constantly, correct?"

Sylphie replied to this by yanking my ear.

For some reason, she seemed opposed to me getting too friendly with Princess Ariel. She hadn't objected to me marrying Roxy or Eris, but I guess Ariel was in a different category. I seemed to remember her saying Nanahoshi *might* be okay, too...

Hmm. It was hard to tell exactly what counted as "cheating" in her mind.

In retaliation for her attack, I slipped behind her and licked the back of her ear.

It hadn't been obvious at the entrance, but the floor of the cavern we were moving through was neatly tiled. Apparently, this tunnel was man-made.

"It gets real twisty and complicated from here on in, so stay real close," called Triss from just ahead. "Keep alert, too. We don't get *many* monsters in here, but sometimes they wander in from the deeper tunnels. Oh, and don't go wandering outside if you see a light in the distance—we're in Red Wyrm territory now."

At this point, the tunnel had a high ceiling and was relatively wide. But just as Triss said, it was constantly curving, and there were frequent side passages and branches in the path. It felt like we were moving through one part of a giant man-made maze.

"This place is really amazing, Rudy," murmured Sylphie quietly. "It isn't some kind of labyrinth, right?"

"Hm? Yeah, I'm pretty sure it isn't."

"How do you think they made such huge tunnels through the mountains?"

I frowned thoughtfully. "Hmm... Well, the Red Wyrms took over this area four hundred years ago. Maybe there were dwarves living around here up until then, or something?"

“Oh, that makes sense. I guess these might be some really old mining tunnels, then...”

Up ahead, Eris poked curiously into one strange side passage after another, only to be dragged back by Ghislaine. For better or worse, it felt like spending last night under a roof had helped us all relax a little.

“By the way, Rudy...”

“Hmm?”

“...Sorry, it’s nothing.”

Sylphie fell silent, but shot a quick glance over her shoulder.

Ariel, Luke, and the attendants were following us at a decent distance. Our formation was feeling kind of loose... we’d probably gotten a bit too spread out. It didn’t seem like there were many monsters lurking on this path, but the last thing we needed was for the princess to get lost.

We’d been walking through the tunnels for quite a while. It was hard to say how long exactly. When you can’t see the sun, it throws off your perception of time; until you get used to walking in those conditions, a single hour can feel like three. Moving through dark, unfamiliar terrain tends to be more fatiguing, too. I’d learned all this from my adventuring days, trekking through dense, overgrown forests where no sunlight ever reached the ground. Ariel and her attendants were clearly getting tired. I was starting to hear a few comments like “It feels like we’ve been walking for *days* now,” and we weren’t moving as quickly as before.

But before anyone could throw in the towel, Triss finally came to a halt at what looked to be a dead end. A stone tablet similar to the one we’d seen at the entrance was sitting unobtrusively on the ground nearby.

When Triss activated this device, the wall of rock in front of us opened up... and we blinked as the sunlight hit our faces.

Just like that, we were back outside again.

Squinting as my eyes adjusted to the sudden brightness, I looked around the area. We'd stepped out into another forest, from the looks of things. It was dense, but not overgrown enough to hide the sky from view.

The sun's position told me that the time was a bit past noon. We'd set out very early that morning, so all in all we'd been walking for about eight hours.

Triss took a few strides out into the open, then turned to face us as we blinked and squinted. "Welcome to the Kingdom of Asura, everyone," she announced, a playful grin spreading across her face.

We'd made it safely across the border after all.

The exit Triss had guided us to was a bit southeast of the actual border checkpoint. If we headed due south from here, we'd reach the Donati Region. Fittoa was off to the southeast. Our ultimate destination, the royal capital, was further to the south of Donati.

After an extended breather, we pushed ahead, trying to make our way out of the forest. Triss was anxious to get us moving. There was a good reason for that: from dawn till dusk, this route was used to smuggle people into Asura; at night, it was used to smuggle people *out*. Whenever two groups heading in opposite directions bumped into each other, the head of that bandit gang tended to get very upset. This seemed to explain why he'd kept us waiting in that cabin overnight as well.

We needed to take several breaks along the way, but we managed to push out of the forest that same day, and then resumed our journey south through the Donati Region.

Naturally, we stayed off the main highways, sticking to quiet, less traveled backroads. Just to be clear, these weren't rough trails crawling with dangerous thieves or monsters. While it was always simplest to take the direct roads that connected various cities and towns, Asura had plenty of others that were mainly used by the locals of that specific region. These were usually *just* wide enough for a single wagon, though, and the princess' carriage did attract some curious looks.

These roads weren't on our maps, but Triss knew them like the back of her hand, so we progressed toward our destination steadily enough. Thanks to her, we stayed one step ahead of Auber... well, assuming he was even pursuing us at this point. It was entirely possible that the Man-God and his allies knew exactly where we were, and had simply decided to concentrate their forces in the capital or the palace. There was no telling if it was the Man-God or Darius who was calling the shots about these things, but we needed to tread very carefully regardless.

On our journey south, we passed by the Fittoa Region.

Some years had passed since the rebuilding effort began in earnest; fields of crops were dotted here and there across its landscape. The people living in the area looked like they'd regained some of their spirits, too. Still, it was a far cry from the endless fields of golden wheat that I remembered. It would probably take another decade before Fittoa regained that level of prosperity.

Eris and Sylphie paused, their horses side by side, to look out at the grassy plain with its smattering of fields. The expressions on their faces contrasted sharply: Sylphie looked nostalgic, and Eris frowned sulkily.

"There's a lot more fields of wheat than the last time we passed through here," said Sylphie.

"If you say so," said Eris. "I don't remember."

"I hope they get it all rebuilt soon."

Eris tossed her head, looking even more surly than before.
"Hmph. I couldn't care less."

"Come on, don't say that. It's the place where we were born and raised, right? I'm not saying I'd want to go back there for good, but... I'm sure you've got some old friends living there, right?"

"Not really. Everyone back home hated my guts."

"Hmm. I guess I wasn't too popular either, actually..." Sylphie paused, smiling slightly as she recalled the past.

It put me in a kind of sentimental mood as well. Both had both been loners as kids, but for very different reasons. Sylphie was bullied relentlessly, and retreated into her shell like a turtle; Eris jumped at anyone who tried to approach her, scaring them off with her wild outbursts. If they'd met back then, maybe they could have balanced each other out.

...Nah, doesn't seem too likely. The only outcome I could picture was Eris beating Sylphie up until she cried. The woman had herself mostly under control these days, but back then, she was basically a wild animal. If you'd tossed the two of them together as kids, Sylphie's life would probably have turned into a hellish nightmare. I'm talking Gian versus Nobita levels of bullying here.

Then again, if you sent Sylphie back as she was now, it might turn into more of a co-bullies type situation. She'd gotten a lot tougher over the years.

"Look, Sylphie," said Eris after a moment. "I'm just going to say one thing."

"What is it?"

"I couldn't have done anything useful for Fittoa, even if I stayed there."

“Hm...?” Sylphie tilted her head, looking something like an uncertain squirrel. *Adorable*. “Oh, right. You were the daughter of the lord, weren’t you? Sort of a princess yourself! It kind of slipped my mind.”

“Hmph. I was just a stupid dress-up doll.”

“Well, you’re pretty imposing these days. I bet you’d make a very convincing ruler if you wanted to.”

“...You think?”

Sylphie’s compliment seemed to put Eris in a better mood. Whatever else you could say about her, the girl wasn’t difficult to placate.

“Well, whatever. It’s not like I *want* to rule Fittoa either way. There’s no way I could handle a job that complicated.”

“Hmm. It does feel like you were born to be a swordmaster, I guess.”

“Exactly!”

Wow, Sylphie’s really laying it on thick today...

“Still, you could easily have ended up spending your whole life as an Asuran noble, huh?”

“Not a chance.”

“I bet Rudy would have stuck around to help you, and ended up ruling from the shadows. He probably would have made you the head of the Boreas family in no time at all.”

Miss Sylphiette? I’m sure you’re not serious, but... you’re not serious, right?

“Then he would have seduced me and wiggled his way into Princess Ariel’s inner circle. The Boreas family would back her for the throne, and we’d end up fighting Darius or Grabel together.”

Did Sylphie let me “seduce” her in this scenario? How would that work, exactly? We probably wouldn’t even have run into each other...

Okay, let’s not overthink a game of make-believe.

“Sounds like things would turn out exactly the same,” said Eris dubiously.

“But you’d be the ruler of the Fittoa Region, and Rudy would be your loyal aide! I bet you two would be the talk of the whole kingdom...”

“All I want is to fight with my sword and make babies with Rudeus. I don’t want anything else.”

Somehow, Eris had delivered that line without a hint of shame. It was enough to make *me* blush, and I wasn’t even the one who’d said it.

“Aren’t *you* satisfied with things the way they are, Sylphie?”

“Oh, absolutely. Sometimes the whole thing almost feels too good to be true, to be honest.”

“...”

“You know, back when we first got married, Rudy and I used to go at it like animals every single night. When there wasn’t anyone else in the house, he’d carry me off to the bedroom with this *ravenous* look on his face! And of course, I was quivering with anticipation the whole way... err... Sorry, I probably shouldn’t be talking about this in public.”

I’d certainly appreciate it if you stopped, yeah. Eris’ eyes were narrowing with what looked like jealousy, and I was starting to think I might get dragged into the bushes tonight for some vigorous lovemaking. It was an appealing idea, but right now we needed to conserve our energy for the task at hand.

“Anyway,” said Sylphie, “I think that’s the whole reason it’s fun to think about how things *might* have turned out. Because I’m really happy with how they did.”

“...I wonder if I’ll feel the same way once I have a child, too.”

“Hmm... if you and Rudy have a kid, it’ll probably be a real lecher...”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Sylphie did have a point. Anyone who inherited half of my genes would probably end up at least *moderately* perverted. Which made me a little anxious about how Lucie might turn out. Sylphie wasn’t that much of a pervert, relatively speaking, but she had Elinalise for a grandmother. What if those dormant horny genes had been activated by combination with my own? We might end up with a daughter who went around sucking innocent young men dry left and right.

This calls for precautionary measures. The secret morality lessons will commence immediately.

“I hope I get one soon,” said Eris after a moment.

“Oh, it won’t take long. You’re a full-blooded human, remember? You’re a much better match for Rudy than I am.”

That seemed like an unnecessarily negative choice of words. At the very least, Sylphie and I matched *perfectly* in bed. Even now, the beast inside me was waiting vigilantly for its chance to get started on baby number two.

“Either way, that comes later,” said Eris. “Right now, the most important thing is keeping him safe.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

The two of them kept chatting. They speculated about what Roxy was doing at the moment, then talked about how good the food was back in Fittoa. Sylphie promised to teach Eris how to cook a

few meals once we got back home. That sort of thing. Sylphie ostensibly did most of the talking. Eris wasn't the best at this kind of casual conversation, and sometimes there were awkward pauses.

Still, the sound of their voices made for pleasant background noise as we rode along. It felt very relaxing just sitting on that horse with my arms wrapped around Sylphie, listening to their conversation. There was no telling when the enemy might attack us next, but that afternoon it was a challenge just to stay awake.

After about ten days on the road, we stopped at a place called Rikket. This was a city near the southern edge of the Donati Region, and a hub for trade with the Royal Region.

Most of the merchants here were heading south to bring their goods to the Royal Region, rather than the other way around. Because of this, the streets were thick with representatives and headmen from villages all across Donati, here to send their harvest south and to buy the crops their people needed from the sprawling market. This was clearly a place of major economic importance for Asura as a whole. It was also larger than the whole of the Magic City of Sharia, even though it was really just one giant trading post and rest stop. That's the Kingdom of Asura for you.

We wanted to make it to the capital city of Ars, without making our presence known if possible. We'd gathered information in the villages along the way, but found no clues about the movements of our pursuers. A city this big would offer them all sorts of places to hide—and set up ambushes, of course.

On the other hand, it also offered *us* a chance to stay undetected... at least in theory. Unfortunately, our party kind of stood out in a crowd. Ariel was still maintaining her anonymity, but

that didn't matter as long as she was strutting around with a bunch of eye-catching bodyguards like Ghislaine, Eris, and Sylphie. Luke was a well-known figure in Asura in his own right.

However, there was no going around this city. Triss knew all the roads in Asura, but she couldn't make new ones appear out of thin air. And people generally only made roads to places they wanted to go to. Bluntly, the only road that led from Donati into the Royal Region ran through this city.

Rikket was a chokepoint, just like the border fortress. There was an excellent chance our enemies were waiting for us here. To my surprise, though, the guards at the gate didn't stop us, and there weren't ranks of armored soldiers across the streets inside.

Triss swiftly guided us to an inn that was well-suited for groups looking to keep a low profile. It looked like a normal place from the outside, but it was actually run and staffed by people closely connected to her bandit gang. They *also* owned the buildings on every side of it, and had underground tunnels to allow for emergency escapes. It was like something out of an old ninja movie. Ariel would be shutting herself inside the inn while Triss headed out onto the streets to gather information. The rest of us stayed in the inn to guard the princess.

Ghislaine and I stood watch at the inn's first-floor stairway, with Eris and Sylphie guarding Ariel in her room. The two attendants had disguised themselves and gone out to buy supplies. Luke was laying low in Ariel's room. That made me a little anxious, but I had to trust that he wouldn't suddenly lose his mind and try to stab the princess. If the man snapped, hopefully he'd just throw himself at her or something...

Stifling a yawn, I glanced over at Ghislaine. She was standing quietly next to the stairway, staring toward the entrance with her ears perked straight up.

The two of us hadn't done much talking since this journey began. I guess she was more of a professional about her duties as a bodyguard than I'd ever be; whenever I tried to strike up a conversation with her on uneventful shifts like this one, she'd cut me off, saying that she was listening for danger. A part of me was starting to wonder if she actually hated my guts. But she wasn't doing much talking to Eris, either. She was probably just talking her job seriously.

Today, however, turned out to be an exception. She actually started a conversation for once. "Rudeus?"

"Yes, Ghislaine?"

"Thank you for your help earlier."

I just blinked, trying to figure out what she was referring to.

"With Wi Taa's armor, I mean."

Oh. This about that battle way back in the forest? "Don't mention it. It's my whole job to support the rest of you."

"You've always been quick to think up clever tricks like that, haven't you? Ever since the old days."

The old days, meaning... ten years ago, probably? I felt like I'd changed lot since then, but maybe I was still the same cheeky little brat to Ghislaine. "I guess so. They usually don't accomplish much against the tougher enemies, though."

"For the tougher ones, you can have Lady Eris do the heavy lifting."

I was a little surprised to hear that coming from Ghislaine, honestly. She'd always seemed more like the "find a way to handle it yourself" type...

"That's the whole reason she trained so hard for all those years."

"...Yeah, you're right."

In my heart, I wanted Sylphie and Roxy to stay put at home where it was safe. But for some reason, I didn't feel the same way about Eris. It probably had something to do with all the effort she'd put in to fight alongside me. The years she'd spent in the Sword Sanctum had really paid off.

Then again, it was also just *impossible* to imagine her waiting patiently back at the house while I went off on some adventure.

Come to think of it...the woman said she wanted to have a baby, but was she actually capable of sitting still during the pregnancy? Kind of a scary thought...

“...”

The conversation seemed to have ground to a halt. *Crap. Don't we have anything else to talk about? Uh, maybe the good old days? Uhhh...*

“By the way, Ghislaine, are you still keeping up with your reading and writing?”

“Yeah. I practice like you taught me when I have some spare time. Wouldn't want to lose a skill I took the time to learn.”

What an admirable attitude. Eris, on the other hand, seemed to have forgotten almost everything I'd taught her by now.

“You know,” said Ghislaine with a smile, “the others at the Sword Sanctum didn't believe me when I told them I'd learned how to write.”

“Couldn't you have just written something for them to prove it?”

“I did, but most of them can't read, either. They said I was scribbling a bunch of nonsense and laughed in my face.”

“Haha...” I kind of wished I'd been there to see that happen.

“How about you, Rudeus? You still practicing with the sword?”

“A bit, yeah. When I have some downtime at home, I practice the forms you taught me and do a bunch of swings as part of my daily workout.”

“Really? You’re a full-fledged magician now, so I figured you’d stopped years ago.”

“Even magicians need to stay in shape, you know.”

I wasn’t trying to improve my skill with the sword at this point, of course. Becoming Paul’s equal had been my goal once, but he was gone now. I only really used it when I was teaching Norn. In this world, you couldn’t make it too far as a swordsman without the use of Battle Aura.

“Oh, this reminds me,” said Ghislaine. “Do you remember that promise you made me, back when you were just a kid?”

“Uhm... what promise was this?”

“Slipped your mind, I see. You said you were going to make another figurine of me.”

Oh, right. I did say something like that, didn’t I? When was that, my tenth birthday? That really takes me back...

“I’ve heard you’re still doing those figurines even now, right? Make me another one sometime, if you don’t have anything better to do.”

“Absolutely.”

“Thanks. I don’t know much about art, but I do like your work a lot.”

That was nice to hear, don’t get me wrong, but why was everyone in this world constantly saying stuff like this with a battle looming on the horizon? It made me antsy. Hopefully we weren’t setting any death flags here...

Nah. I could understand it, actually. I still had my memories of cheesy movies from my previous life, so I felt like talking about the

future right before a battle meant your death was all but guaranteed. But it was probably the other way around. Reminding yourself of the reasons you *wanted* to survive made it more likely that you *would*.

“Hm?”

Suddenly, Ghislaine’s ears and nose twitched. I lifted my staff and prepared myself for a fight; but she held out a hand to stop me.

“Don’t worry. It’s fine.”

A moment later, Triss walked into the inn with sacks in both her hands. She nudged the door shut with her shoulder, then strode up to us and held out one of the bags.

“Hey there. Brought some food for ya.”

“Appreciate it.”

“Yeah, aren’t I nice? Make sure you savor it real gratefully.”

There were a number of tough, pear-like fruits inside the sack. I took one out and tossed it to Ghislaine, who immediately began to gnaw away at it, skin and all.

“All right then, guys. I’ll leave you to it.”

Triss waved her hand vaguely and made her way up the stairs toward the second floor. The woman had only spent ten days with us, but it felt like she’d already found her place in the party. Basically, she fell into the same category as Ellemoi and Cleane—a true believer in the righteous Princess Ariel. She had a foul mouth on her, but she seemed like a decent person.

My only real complaint was that her clothing made it tough to keep my eyes where they belonged. I mean, I guess Ghislaine’s outfit wasn’t any less revealing...but it’s easier to appreciate the muscular beauty of a warrior’s body on a purely artistic level.

“Triss seems to be in high spirits today,” Ghislaine commented.

“You’re right. I wonder if something happened.”

I pulled out a pear for myself, skinned it with my knife and took a bite. The thing was kind of *crunchy* for some reason, and its flavor was more sour than sweet. For whatever reason, a lot of the fruit in this world didn't taste so great on its own. It was edible enough, though.

"I expect she heard some useful information," said Ghislaine. "Leaning something valuable always puts those sorts in a good mood. Geese was the same way."

"Hmm, I bet you're right."

Princess Ariel had tasked Triss with scouting the city and gathering all sorts of information. Learning the whereabouts of Auber and Darius' soldiers was naturally our top priority, but she wanted to know plenty of other things as well. She'd told Triss to report anything that seemed even *possibly* relevant; she then sorted through that flood of information, picked out the most important pieces, and discussed them with me. Since Ariel was choosing what information she would share with me, there was a chance I might miss out on hearing something crucial. But at this point, I'd decided to just accept that risk. It wasn't like I was capable of controlling events perfectly in any case.

Right now, my job was to consider the tidbits Ariel did pass on as carefully as I could.

"That reminds me," I said. "Didn't Geese say something about heading for Asura? I guess we might bump into him somewhere."

"He'll probably spot us first, if he's still around."

Yeah, that did sound like Geese. I could see him picking us out at a distance, then planning out and staging some kind of dramatic reunion.

"But knowing him," Ghislaine continued, "he probably lost all his money gambling and wandered off to some other country years ago."

“Isn’t Geese a pretty good gambler, though?”

“Only when he’s broke.”

From what Roxy had told me, the Kingdom of Asura wasn’t a great place to live in if you were an adventurer like Geese. There weren’t many monsters to slay in general, and the government assigned knights to protect specific villages. On top of that, the Royal Magicians and their knightly counterparts were periodically dispatched on large-scale hunts that doubled as training missions.

As a result, monster-hunting jobs were few and far between. The large Asuran businesses tended to have their own dedicated resource-gathering operations, so there weren’t many requests for raw materials, either. And given how safe and secure the Kingdom was, the demand for temporary guards was limited as well. The tasks that got posted were mostly tedious, time-consuming stuff like missing-person jobs and delivery runs. At certain times of the year you probably could find work helping out on someone’s farm, but there simply wasn’t much real *adventuring* to be done, compared to other countries.

That was particularly true in the regions closer to the capital city of Ars. There were always a certain number of youngsters who decided to become adventurers anyway, but as they ranked up they usually drifted off to Fittoa or Donati—and eventually further to the north or south. Those with remarkable skills or extensive training could sometimes find steady posts as household tutors or bodyguards, but that was a high bar to clear. And you didn’t need to be an adventurer to secure those jobs, anyway. There were professional specialists in Asura who could handle most of the work that needed doing, so the people here didn’t feel much need to rely on a bunch of smelly, rough-and-tumble freelancers. You can understand why the headquarters of the Adventurers’ Guild was located in Millis instead.

“...Hm?”

As Ghislaine and I were chatting about all this, I noticed her ears twitching once again. And this time, the expression on her face turned slightly stern. Maybe trouble had finally found us. I dropped the bag of fruit, grasped my staff in both hands and stared warily at the door.

But Ghislaine wasn’t looking at the entrance to the inn. Her gaze was directed at the second floor. When I listened carefully, I could just make out the sound of people arguing.

What’s all this about?

“I’m going to go take a look, Ghislaine.”

“Right.”

I made my way slowly up the stairs. Sylphie and Eris were still outside Ariel’s room, but they were both watching the door in concern. Did we have a real problem on our hands here?

“Hey, Sylphie.”

“Oh, Rudy! Triss just went in a few minutes ago, but now it sounds like Princess Ariel and Luke are arguing about something...”

Ariel and Luke were having a fight? That sounded... ominous. Didn’t she have that situation under control? Supposedly?

Well, maybe this was all part of the plan. Sometimes arguments could be necessary.

“It’s Rudeus. Pardon me, but I’m coming in.”

I knocked at the door just for the sake of politeness, but then swung it open without waiting for a response. Inside, I found Luke on his feet, looking pale and shaken, Ariel sitting in a chair with an unruffled expression, and Triss looking on awkwardly.

“Ah, Sir Rudeus,” said Ariel without even batting an eye. “Just the man I wanted to see.”

“Has something happened, Your Highness?”

“Yes. Triss has just brought us some intriguing information.”

“About what, if I might ask?”

“...It concerns Lord Sauros Boreas Greyrat.”

Sauros? It might be *very* important, then, at least to Ghislaine. Maybe this was something Ariel had specifically asked Triss to investigate...

“As it happens, it’s often easier to learn about the intrigues of the Asuran royal court in these regional cities than it would be in the capital,” Ariel continued. “Those who *know too much* tend to put some distance between themselves and Ars, where certain anxious nobles might have them killed.”

That was news to me. I guess it made sense, though. Maybe.

“In any case, we’ve learned the primary culprit behind Lord Sauros’ fall.”

“And... who would that be?”

Luke’s face contorted into an alarming grimace. Ariel, on the other hand, looked as emotionless as a mask.

“I’m afraid that it *was* a member of my faction, acting on their own initiative. Someone who also happened to have a personal grudge against Lord Sauros...”

Ariel paused, but only long enough to draw a breath.

“Namely, Pilemon Notos Greyrat.”

Ah. So it was Pilemon himself who’d done it.

That did sound plausible, unfortunately. The Notos clan had been the leading backers of Ariel among the aristocracy, while the Boreas family favored Grabel. They were enemies at the time. On top of that, it sounded like Pilemon hated Sauros for personal reasons.

He'd probably jumped eagerly on his chance to bring the old man down.

This wasn't good news. But it didn't come as a huge surprise, either. Despite the circumstances at the time, Sauros was still the liege lord of an entire region of Asura. And even with his territory devastated, he had allies among the First Prince's faction. Only another powerful, influential noble could really have orchestrated his downfall.

"...What do you intend to do, Princess Ariel?" I asked.

"I'll allow Ghislaine to take his life, just as I promised her."

Luke bit his lip hard at those words.

This certainly explained his angry outburst. I was honestly surprised Ariel was being so blunt about this, knowing how much he cared about his family. It almost seemed like she was publicly choosing Ghislaine over him.

"However, that's *only* going to happen if Pilemon... and the Notos family... truly have betrayed us. We don't have any conclusive proof of that just yet."

"..."

"Assuming that it's true, I intend to have Ghislaine execute him, and then appoint Luke as the new head of the Notos family."

"And if he hasn't really betrayed you?"

"I'll convince Ghislaine to settle for the others."

"The others? Oh..."

She'd called Pilemon the *primary* culprit. That implied there were additional conspirators. So in this scenario, she'd spare her ally but murder all the others. It didn't sound much like justice, but that's just the way things went sometimes. At the moment, I couldn't scrounge up much sympathy for a bunch of murderous aristocrats I'd never even met.

"Is that understood, Luke?" said Ariel, looking over in his direction.

"...There's no proof that *any* of this is true."

Luke's expression was pained. I could tell that he understood Ariel's perspective, but didn't want to accept it on an emotional level. Still, he was staying relatively calm, given that we were discussing the potential execution of his own father.

"It's entirely possible that someone's manipulating us..."

Hmm. Did he just shoot a look in my direction?

"Luke, please rest assured—as I've explained previously, Rudeus will *not* be usurping control of the Notos Greyrat family."

"Your Highness! We shouldn't be discussing this in front of him!"

"I think it's the other way around, actually. I'd like to make this very clear to him and everyone else involved." Ariel paused to draw a breath, then continued in a firm, clear voice. "No matter how much he contributes to our cause, I have no intention of granting Rudeus a rank in the Asuran nobility."

That was fine by me. I wouldn't have accepted it even if she had offered. But for whatever reason, Luke was looking at me with undisguised hostility. I wasn't sure how I should react to that. It felt like the next words I spoke, or even a slight change in my facial expression, might determine Luke's course of action.

Was he going to turn on us after all?

As I hesitated, Ariel stepped in. "Now then, Luke, I think we should continue this discussion by ourselves. You don't mind, do you, Rudeus?"

"Of course not."

Ariel had told me she could handle this. At the moment, staying completely out of it felt like my best option. I watched quietly as she and Luke walked out of the room together.

That same evening, Ariel reported back to me. In her private conversation with Luke, she'd finally convinced him to open up and be completely honest with her.

Long story short—our suspicions were correct. The Man-God was giving him advice.

Apparently, it had only happened once so far. As we were preparing for our journey, the Man-God had warned Luke to "be ready for Rudeus' betrayal." His claim was that I'd secretly allied myself with Darius so that I could seize control of the Notos Greyrat house. In this scenario, I was motivated by a thirst for power, lust for Ariel, and simple greed. Sylphie had no idea of my intentions; it was all happening behind her back.

During the day, I would pretend to be Ariel's ally, but carefully lead her into the enemy's traps. And at night, I'd sneak off to meet with Darius' spies and tell them everything I knew. In fact, I'd secretly orchestrated *all* of these events, after many years of scheming. Even my marriage to Sylphie was supposedly just another step in my master plan.

This version of Rudeus sounded like one ridiculously thorough, clever guy. It was a shame I couldn't have him take the reins for me. My life would probably go a lot smoother.

At first, Luke had found all of this implausible. It was particularly hard for him to believe I had any interest in joining the nobility. I felt like he'd never trusted me that much, but I guess I'd earned that benefit of the doubt, at least.

However, recent events like the destruction of the teleportation circles and the betrayal of the Notos family had unfolded *exactly* as

the Man-God predicted. That was enough to chip away at Luke's faith in me. And once he started looking at me with suspicion, he found reasons to believe the Man-God's story.

It seemed he still suspected me, even now.

Ariel told me that the best way to prove my innocence to Luke was through my actions. She also promised that she would keep him from doing anything unwise in the meantime.

Hearing all this came as something of a relief. The Man-God hadn't done anything *that* clever here, so it wouldn't be that hard to break his grip on Luke. The fact of the matter was, I'd never even met Darius, I had no desire to take over my dad's childhood home, and I wasn't interested in sleeping with Ariel. Luke could suspect me to his heart's content, but I just *wasn't* going to betray them.

By the Man-God's standards, this seemed like half-assed work. It felt pretty clear that he'd never expected to get much out of Luke.

Still, I never would have learned any of this from Luke myself. It was a good thing Ariel had stepped in to handle the situation. She was way better suited to the job than me.

The next day, we set out south from Rikket.

Luke constantly glared at me now, and did his very best to ensure that I was never alone with Ariel. He probably thought that I might murder the princess and send her head to Grabel, now that she'd publicly declared I would never be a noble.

I didn't really mind. At this point, I knew what was going on in Luke's head, and Ariel had him on a leash. It was one less thing to worry about. I don't know if Ariel had anticipated any of this, but I

was impressed by how quickly she'd lightened the load on my shoulders.

One other thing worth mentioning took place that day. The princess personally told both Ghislaine and Eris about the things we'd learned about the death of Sauros.

"...So all in all, it seems quite likely that members of my faction played a key role in the downfall of Lord Sauros."

"I see..."

"Hmph."

Ghislaine listened to Ariel's explanation with cold anger in her eyes. Eris made a show of looking disinterested, but you could see through that easily enough. She was squeezing the pommel of her sword so tightly that all the blood drained from her fingers.

"Are you going to cut me down, Ghislaine?" Ariel asked calmly.

"...No. I'll kill the enemies you've offered me."

Ghislaine didn't seem too fixated on murdering Pilemon in particular. I'd expected this to require some persuasion, but I guess she'd thought this through in her own way.

Eris didn't say anything for a moment, but then she nodded slightly. "Sounds good. I'm willing to kill anyone who might cause Rudeus trouble."

Never change, Eris.

Now our remaining goal was to reach the capital and have our showdown with the enemy. Over the course of twenty days, we made our way slowly south along the backroads—and finally arrived at Ars, the crown jewel of Asura.

Chapter 7: Ars, the Royal Capital

ARS, THE CAPITAL OF ASURA, is also the single largest city in the world. It takes its name from the legendary hero who led mankind to victory in the Great Human-Demon War.

The first time a traveler lays their eyes upon this metropolis, their astonishment is impossible to disguise. The towering castle at its center, known as the Silver Palace, is surrounded by the great mansions of the high nobles; beyond the fortress-like walls that encircle this area, the city itself sprawls out in every direction, all the way to the horizon.

Here, you will find an enormous arena, the splendid training grounds of the Royal Knights, and many beautiful Millis churches. Canals run throughout the entire city, crossed by countless lovely bridges. Other notable attractions include: the headquarters of the world's largest businesses; the original training halls of the great Water God Style; the famous playhouses of the theater district; the sensual, seductive women of the pleasure quarter; and the great gate built to commemorate Asura's victory in the Laplace War...

This is a city that seems truly endless. No one vantage point can offer you a view of it in its entirety. It spreads far beyond even the Alteir River, which gave it life—it sprawls as far as any eye can see.

They say that everything in the world can be found within Ars, the oldest of its cities. And once you've seen it for yourself, you may find it difficult to argue.

—EXCERPT FROM “WANDERING THE WORLD” BY THE ADVENTURER BLOODY KANT

Staring out at the capital from the top of a tall hill, Eris and I gaped almost simultaneously.

“Whoa.”

The city of Ars spread out before us, larger by far than any city I’d seen in this world.

The castle at its center caught my eye first. It was as large as Perugius’, if not larger, and it gleamed like silver in the sunlight. Grand, thick walls at least twenty meters tall encircled this central structure; they were so imposing that it was hard to imagine anything, even a stray Wyrm, forcing its way past them.

The buildings just outside those walls were also impressive in their own right. On every side, the palace was surrounded by gorgeous, ornate mansions. Maybe this was where the more powerful aristocrats lived? Half of the buildings were big enough to qualify as castles, and the area was encircled by a second ring of walls.

Past that point, the city spilled in every direction, with additional walls at regular intervals. It seems they kept adding new ones as the place had grown over the centuries. I counted five outer rings, after which the city just continued in a great unbroken jumble all the way to the horizon. It must have gotten too expensive to keep making them, and they had the Royal Knights regularly cleaning up any nearby monsters. Not that Asura had that many in the first place.

Compared to the megacities of my old world, this place was nothing special. But there was something really awe-inspiring about a medievalesque city big enough to fill your entire field of vision.

“Well, we’ve finally returned.”

The other members of our party were moved by the sight as well, but in a different way. Their eyes were fixed on the castle at the city’s center, and their faces were stern. Even Ariel had gotten down

out of her carriage to stare at it. But after a long moment, she turned and said “Let’s keep moving, everyone.”

Thus we finally made our way into the streets of the royal capital.

As impressive as Ars looked from above, it wasn’t that distinctive once you were inside it.

All the cities of this world were pretty similar, at least around their entrances. You had your street vendors, your stables, and your parties of travelers and adventurers wandering around. There *were* slightly fewer adventurers here, though, and they tended to be young. The few veterans I did spot mostly looked kind of beat-down and bedraggled.

The other thing that struck me was how wide the street was. You could fit six full-sized carriages next to each other on this thing. Reminded me of the highways from my old world. This was apparently one of the main roads that ran all the way to the central plaza.

“We’re heading to my residence in the city for now,” Ariel announced from inside her carriage. “We’ll use it as our initial base. There are preparations to be made before we can enter the court.”

We got moving immediately. Our destination was the district of towering mansions owned by high Asuran nobles. Given the sheer size of the city, just making it there might take us half a day. Luke was at the head of our group, followed by Sylphie, then Ghislaine, then the carriage, and finally Eris and me. We were arranged in single file. The road was large enough that we *could* have spread out, but there could be complications if you met a noble coming in the other direction. Normally the lower-ranked aristocrat would be expected to move aside, but Ariel’s carriage was unmarked, and

having her get out to resolve some pointless argument would be a major waste of time.

Past a certain point, the streets began to change around us. The businesses targeting travelers and adventurers gave way to ones aimed at average city residents. I began to notice people on the street pointing in our direction.

“Huh? Isn’t that... Sir Luke? And Silent Fitz?”

“You’re right... Look, they’re escorting that carriage! You don’t think—”

“Is it Princess Ariel?!”

“She must have rushed back when she heard about the king’s illness!”

One look at Luke and Sylphie was all it took for the people of this city to figure out who was in the carriage. But it was no longer necessary for us to hide the truth at this point. For one thing, it was never realistic to think we could travel through this massive city completely undetected. Even if we’d somehow managed to sneak to Ariel’s residence undetected by Darius, the “preparations” she’d mentioned would probably alert him to our presence. And in any case, we’d have to show ourselves eventually to make our appearance at court. And we weren’t in that much of a rush, either. It wasn’t the end of the world if we caused a bit of a commotion.

But, uh, that said...

“Sir Luuuke! Look this waaay!”

“Sir Fitz! Sir Fitz!”

“Welcome home, Princess Ariel!”

Wow. They’re seriously popular around here, huh?

Voices called out to us from all sides, and some people even tossed flowers at us. Of course not *everyone* on the street was reacting this way, of course, but I’d say it was at least a fifth. Ariel

and her companions were clearly all celebrities, and they had more passionate fans than I'd expected. Luke was even waving to his adoring public. Nearly a decade had passed since they fled this city, but they'd retained their popularity nonetheless... that was genuinely impressive.

Despite the excitement, I noticed that nobody rushed out into the street to mob us. There were probably some strict rules about blocking the path of a noble's procession. Maybe you could even get murdered on the spot, like in Edo period Japan.

"Ready, set... Sir Fiiiiitz!"

Whenever Sylphie got a chorus of cheers, I saw her scratch behind her ears. That was her *I'm embarrassed* gesture. I made a mental note to tease her ruthlessly about this later.

The cheers only grew louder once we made our way past the central plaza. I had a feeling people were spreading the news about "Princess Ariel's return". Things were getting so boisterous that I started to worry that the city guards might come running to get things under control. That kind of chaos would be an ideal opportunity for Auber to show up and stab someone in the back.

Happily, nothing that dramatic ended up happening. I did notice a group of armored men in the crowd at one point, but they were cheering right along with everyone else. The man who looked to be their commanding officer was the most enthusiastic of all.

Ariel seemed to have the common people of this city already on her side, including the lower-ranking soldiers. They didn't look like they were burning with anti-government sentiment, but they still greeted her like a returning hero. I was starting to feel a little awkward tagging along behind this procession.

"This feels great!"

...Eris seemed to be having the opposite reaction, though.

Once we finally reached the nobles' district, the adoring crowds quickly thinned out. Maybe Ariel's popularity was mostly limited to the common people. Or maybe the aristocrats just had too much pride to stand around on the streets hooting and hollering. It was probably a bit of both.

Here, I noticed occasional groups of armored people patrolling the streets in formation. They wore full suits of thick silver plated armor and helmets that covered their faces completely. Something about their movements told me that they took themselves a lot more seriously than the ordinary soldiers I'd spotted earlier. If those guys were like the city guard, these were probably something closer to military units.

"Wonder who those people are..."

"They're novice knights," said Eris.

I turned and blinked, a bit surprised that she knew the answer.

"Unless you attend a knight academy, you've got to start off as a novice until you've learned all their ceremonies or rites or whatever."

"No kidding?"

"Yeah. Patrolling the city like that is one of their duties, too."

"Huh. I'm kind of impressed you know all this, Eris."

"Heh heh. Well, I just heard about it from this friend of mine."

Eris... had friends? Now that was *really* a surprise. It didn't sound like she was talking about an imaginary person, either.

"Is this someone you met at the Sword Sanctum?"

"That's right."

Okay, so she'd bonded with somebody over their shared love of swords. Sword buddies! Yeah, that made a lot more sense.

"You know, I'm really happy to hear you made a friend there. I'm sure you get into a few fights, but try not to be too stubborn, okay? And make sure you stay in touch!"

"Sure, but she's..."

Eris trailed off mid-sentence. Her attention darted elsewhere, and her hand was on her sword.

I followed her gaze. One of the novice knights was staring right at us. Thanks to the full-face helmet, we couldn't see their expression. Had we just encountered an enemy? I couldn't sense open hostility, but this person's movements seemed unusually... crisp. I had a gut feeling that this wasn't just *any* novice knight we were dealing with.

After speaking to someone who seemed to be their commander, the novice broke away from their group and began sprinting toward us.

"Hm?!"

Sylphie, Ghislaine, and Luke all drew their weapons. Sylphie actually got her rod out before Ghislaine had unsheathed her sword. She must have been on high alert.

"Oh my!"

The armored novice, clearly startled, came to an immediate halt. After an uncertain pause, they reached up to their bucket-like helmet and pulled it off... revealing a *very* beautiful woman.

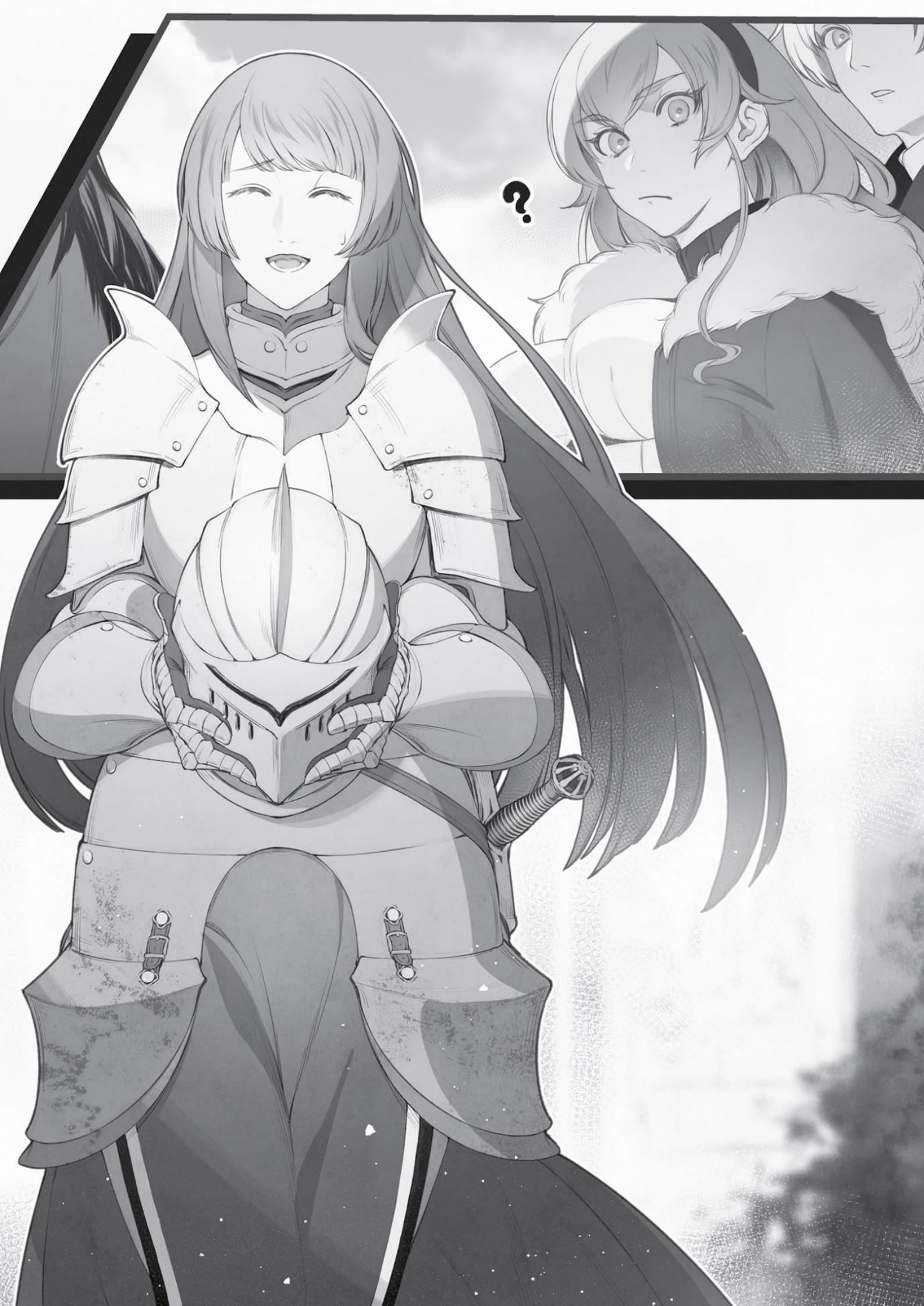
I mean, she really was a stunner. Her hair was long and silky; somehow, even the sweat shining on her forehead looked appealing.

Also, she was gazing in our direction. At Eris, specifically.

"Eris! Ghislaine! It's me!"

Huh. Guess it's someone they met on the road?

Eris stared at the woman from her horse, but didn't immediately reply.



“I’m so glad to see you’re still alive and well, Eris! My master was so pessimistic about your chances against the Dragon God that I rather assumed you were riding off to die... But in any case, what are you doing in Asura? If you’d just sent a letter in advance, I—”

“Who the heck are you?”

The pretty woman in the armor drew a sharp breath, and I saw a hint of sadness on her face. But she didn’t look particularly *surprised*. I guess she knew what Eris was like.

“I’m just kidding,” said Eris, nimbly getting down off her horse. “Good to see you again, Isolde. I didn’t recognize you for a second in that weird armor.”

“What’s so weird? This is the official armor of the Asuran Royal knights... I thought it was rather impressive.”

“Looks hard to move around in, though.”

“With the Water God Style, you don’t *have* to move very much. This suits me perfectly.”

Now that it was obvious Eris knew Isolde, Luke sheathed his sword. Sylphie also looked relieved, but still kept her rod handy. Ghislaine let her blade dangle loosely as she scanned the area. They were probably right to stay on alert; the moment *everyone* relaxes is the best time for your enemies to launch a sneak attack.

“Are you in the service of whoever owns this carriage now? Well, of course you are. You know, there are rumors flying around the city that the Second Princess has returned... is that her in there, by any chance? But why would *you* be accompanying... oh, of course! The Princess was studying in the Magic City of Sharia, wasn’t she? You must have met her there. Is that right? And then she hired you on as a bodyguard, perhaps?”

This Isolde woman *looked* like the quiet type, but she seemed to be a bit of a chatterbox.

Eris didn't try to get a word in edgewise. She just stood there with her arms folded, letting the words hit her like a volley of machine-gun fire. Even when it was over, she took a few seconds before replying.

"...Yeah, something like that."

I got the feeling she'd stopped listening halfway through Isolde's monologue. This was probably how their conversations always went.

"After my arrival in this city, I ended up joining the Royal Knights on my master's recommendation. Once I'm formally appointed as a knight, I should be granted the rank of Water Emperor as well."

"Oh yeah? Nice going, Isolde."

"Thank you."

At this point, Luke turned his horse around and came trotting toward us. After dismounting, he approached Eris and Isolde with a gentle smile on his face. "I'm sorry to interrupt your conversation... Eris, I assume this woman is an acquaintance of yours?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"I see. I'm sure you have a great deal to catch up on, but it would be best for you to wrap this conversation up relatively quickly."

"Sure."

Luke turned to Isolde and offered her a polite, graceful bow. "My apologies, miss. I'm afraid we're on duty at the moment. Perhaps you'll be able to stop by later, at a more opportune time? By way of apology, we'd be pleased to—"

"There's no need for that, thank you," Isolde interrupted coldly.

"I see. Very well then, miss. Good day to you."

Somehow maintaining his friendly, apologetic smile, Luke quickly got on his horse and returned to the front of our procession.

Isolde watched him go with a scowl on her face. I looked on in mild surprise. It wasn't every day you saw a woman react to Luke that negatively.

"So that's the famous Rudeus, I expect," she said, lowering her voice almost to a whisper. "He's *exactly* as irritating as I imagined... And what's a magician doing carrying a sword, anyway? Does he think it makes him look impressive? I hope you didn't actually marry that man, Eris."

"...Uhm. I'm married to Rudeus now, yeah."

"*Really?* He's handsome enough, I'll grant you that... but what kind of person flirts with another woman right in front of his wife? You've got terrible taste in men, Eris."

"Hm...?"

Eris just looked confused.

It seemed Isolde had mistaken Luke for me. It wasn't great hearing someone badmouthing me in my presence, even accidentally. And I *did* practice with a wooden sword when I was training, although I wasn't really trying to show off or anything...

"Anyway, we've got to go, Isolde."

"Of course. I'm sorry for delaying you in the course of your duties. Will you be staying in this city for a while, then?"

Eris glanced at me uncertainly. I nodded slightly in return. We'd be here until Princess Ariel managed to seize the throne, at the very least.

For the first time since her arrival, Isolde noticed me as well. She looked a bit nonplussed. "Er... and who is this gentleman?"

Well, this is awkward. Do I admit I'm Rudeus?

I had no real reason to use a false name... but she'd probably be embarrassed to realize she'd been insulting me where I could hear her.

“Neeeigh!”

As I was considering my options, Matsukaze stepped forward on his own initiative and pushed Eris in the back with his head.

Whoa there, calm down... I'll give you some cabbage later, boy...

“Oh, my apologies. You’re in a hurry, of course.”

Hmm. Isolde seemed to have interpreted this as a sign that we were antsy to get going.

“All right then, Eris,” she continued. “I’ll have to show you around the city when you do get some time off... You can introduce me to your friend as well, perhaps.”

She glanced in my direction again, but I opted to say nothing. Maybe this wouldn’t be *quite* as awkward if she found out I was Rudeus a few days from now?

“I don’t think I understand, but okay,” Eris replied.

“What is there to understand? You never change, Eris... Well then—may the blessings of Saint Millis be upon you all.”

With a clean, smooth bow, Isolde trotted back toward her unit. It seemed she was a faithful member of the Millis Church. That would explain why she didn’t think too highly of me.

Eris watched her go, then turned abruptly and hopped back onto her horse. Once Luke saw her mounted, he immediately got our procession moving again.

“That girl’s Isolde. She’s a Water King. We got to know each other back at the Sword Sanctum.”

Isolde was probably the sword buddy we’d been talking about earlier, then. That was quite a coincidence. “You two really get along, don’t you? That’s nice.”

“Yeah, I guess we do. But...” Eris paused for a moment and glanced over in Isolde’s direction. Her group of silver-armored

knights were just disappearing down a side street in tight formation. "She might end up on the other side this time."

Oh. Right.

Orsted had actually listed the Water King Isolde Cluel as one of the swordmasters who might fight for the other side. Eris already knew that the Water God Reida was probably among our enemies. Based on that, she must have guessed that Isolde might be working for them too.

It was hard to guess how much a novice knight could influence events... but despite her current rank, she was still a fearsomely powerful swordswoman. There was a good chance she might show up on the battlefield at some point.

"...Could you handle that, Eris? If it happened?"

"She'd be a good challenge. Maybe we'd finally get to settle which of us is stronger."

"Right..."

Eris said it with no hesitation. It seemed strange to me, but those were obviously her genuine feelings. The two of them were rivals. That made sense. But if they were comfortable with the idea of *killing* each other, it wasn't the kind of rivalry I could ever really understand.

I had to hope it wouldn't come to that, and they could keep competing with each other for many years.

Death tends to be a pretty final thing, you know?

A little further down the road, our procession took a right turn and began to climb uphill. We soon reached a thick, imposing wall guarded by soldiers, but Luke showed them some sort of emblem he

was carrying, and they let us through the gate immediately. After cutting across the district where the mid-rank nobles lived, we passed through another wall... and emerged into an area where the houses were as big as the fortresses of minor nations.

This was the high nobles' district.

Ariel's residence turned out to be a decent distance away from the Silver Palace. Although it stood on an ordinary city block, the thing had to be five times larger than my house back in Ranoa. It wasn't as enormous as the mansion Eris and her family had once lived in, but it was *far* too large to be a practical house for any one person.

It was evening by the time we reached its gates. We'd entered Ars a little after noon, so it really had taken half our day just to move through the city's streets.

When we entered the mansion's grounds, a man who looked to be a butler emerged from within. After spotting Luke, he ran off in a great hurry and gathered all the maids to receive us.

There were only five of them, as it turned out. Apparently, this small household staff had been keeping the mansion well-maintained during the years of Ariel's absence. After a few formalities, they showed us into the building itself.

The interior was luxurious. It couldn't match Perugius' castle for sheer splendor, but every point of importance was occupied with pricey-looking works of art. The decor was just slightly fancier than what I remembered seeing in Eris' childhood home. That seemed about right for the second residence of an Asuran princess.

Once we were assigned our individual rooms, we headed to the bath to wash off the dust of the road. Even the buckets we used to rinse ourselves were richly ornamented works of art. The mansion apparently had a larger bathroom with a tub and a larger bath, but it was presumably reserved for Princess Ariel.

After we'd all freshened up a little, it was time for dinner. I dined with Ariel, Eris, and Sylphie that night. Ariel's official subordinates apparently ate in a different room.

"Now then, Sir Rudeus..."

"Yes, Your Highness?"

"First, let me express my gratitude. Thanks in no small part to you, we've made it safely to our destination."

We'd only just finished our meal, but it seemed the princess was ready to get down to business.

"I'm going to begin making my arrangements tomorrow. I will prepare a suitable *stage* for the arrival of Lord Perugius, and the downfall of High Minister Darius. This will involve sounding out the nobles who've switched sides in my absence, gathering information, contacting the allies I had waiting for me in the city, and taking certain other measures. I'm going to be *quite* busy."

"Right."

"I intend to set the stage promptly, before Darius can move against us. Fortunately, the news of my father's illness has already brought the Kingdom's most powerful nobles to the city."

So it won't be long until the showdown, then. "How long are you planning to spend on these preparations?"

"It should take about ten days."

"Got it." That was honestly faster than I'd expected.

"We've already secured the cards we need to play," Ariel continued. "I'll take other steps as well, but in essence, I believe our victory is *already* guaranteed—so long as we have our stage. For that reason, it seems possible that the enemy will attempt to destroy that stage by force."

Made sense. Instead of competing in a hopeless chess match, Darius might just try to overturn the board. Our enemies had been holding back their firepower so far; this seemed like a very plausible time for them to use it.

“We’ve assembled a competent force in our own right, but I’d like to increase the odds in our favor. It would be best to chip away at our enemy’s threats in advance.”

“That makes sense...”

“I would like to ask you, Eris, and Sylphie to take on this particular role.”

“You want us to go out and hunt down the enemy?”

“No. I imagine that would be very difficult indeed. The capital is an enormous place, and if you spend too long wandering its streets, they may launch an attack on me first.”

Ariel had allies in this city, but none of them were powerful fighters capable of going head-to-head with the likes of a North Emperor. In other words, her actual fighting force was limited to the small group she’d brought with her. And if Sylphie, Eris, and I all wandered off, that would only leave Luke and Ghislaine to protect her. Ghislaine was one hell of a fighter, but she’d probably be overwhelmed if the enemy sent multiple swordmasters on the level of a North King.

“Instead,” Ariel continued, “I think we can *lure* them out into the open.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’ll deliberately present them with a golden opportunity so that they’ll pounce. I have a magic item that should make this possible.”

Was she talking about that appearance-altering ring, maybe? With that thing, we could disguise someone as Ariel, and put them in

a situation where they'd be vulnerable. Then we could strike at the enemy when they showed themselves.

Staging the “opportunity” wouldn’t be that hard. Ariel could even work it into the schedule she had in mind. We’d give the enemy chances to attack her on the way back from her meetings with the nobles. If they didn’t come in the morning, we’d try it again at night, and change things up slightly. By having them come to us, we wouldn’t have to waste time looking for them, and it would be easier to keep Ariel safe during the operation. The *real* princess would be close by, after all.

“This would involve placing you in some amount of danger, Sylphie. However—”

“That won’t be a problem,” Sylphie interrupted. “This is the moment of truth, right? Let’s do everything we possibly can.”

It sounded like she’d be acting as the decoy. Which worried me a little... but it wasn’t like she’d be “safe” anywhere on the battlefield, really. We’d come too far to back down now. As long as she was willing, I’d just have to make damn sure I protected her.

“Do you think they’ll actually take the bait?” I asked quietly.

“I would say... it’s about a fifty-fifty chance,” Ariel replied.

Honestly, we hadn’t been attacked a single time since slipping past Auber into Asuran territory. We’d been cautious and alert, of course, but the journey here had taken nearly a month. Surely there were moments when they could have ambushed us. To me, that suggested they’d anticipated Ariel’s plan for a dramatic showdown, and chose to gather their forces here to overwhelm us at the crucial moment. In that case, it was very possible they had *more* than enough firepower to do the job. The Man-God had given them a good sense of our party’s size and strength, after all. It was the kind of forceful, bloody strategy that might lead to ugly complications

down the road. But with the throne of Asura on the line, that was probably a risk they were prepared to take.

"If they do bite, we'll be in good shape," said Ariel. "But if they don't..."

"...I guess we'll have to settle things in one big battle."

"Indeed. I think we'd have to rely on you quite heavily in that scenario, Sir Rudeus."

Yeah, I guess so. Not a super reassuring thought. "Can we call in any sort of reinforcements?"

"We do have a number of allies I found in Ranoa and sent here in advance, but even the best of them are only Advanced-class swordsmen or magicians. I intend to deploy them on the day of our performance, but they wouldn't be much use against a North King, much less an Emperor."

Oh well. Never hurts to ask, I guess...

"If it's absolutely necessary, we could perhaps ask our... other ally for assistance."

"Our *other* ally..."

That had to mean Orsted. At this point, I wasn't even sure if he was in the city yet. I'd kept up my regular reports, but there hadn't been much to tell him lately, and he wasn't saying much either. Ariel hadn't seen him face-to-face since that first encounter. Luke was too wary of me to let me wander off alone with her.

"I guess you're right. Let's try that if all else fails."

Sylphie looked somewhat puzzled by this exchange, but hopefully she'd shrug it off.

"Very well then. We'll proceed with the initial plan for now."

"Understood."

We had our general strategy for the next ten days worked out.

The battle for control of Asura would begin tomorrow.

Chapter 8: Duel at Dusk

THE NEXT MORNING, we set out with Ariel for our first trip to the Silver Palace.

Only six of us were going. Triss was staying behind at the residence to begin the preparations for her big moment, and Ariel's two attendants weren't coming, either. That was partly because Ellemoi and Cleane would only slow us down in a fight, but the two of them also came from prestigious families that could be valuable allies. The princess had them rushing around the city, trying to win over their relatives and other houses with close ties. Ariel seemed to be taking that "ten days" deadline very seriously.

The Silver Palace of Asura was just as imposing up close as it seemed at a distance. It was larger even than Perugius' towering castle, and there were apparently *many* other structures in the sprawling grounds behind it, including the main residences of the royal family and a number of beautiful gardens.

We wouldn't be venturing back there this time, of course. I kind of wanted to see the royal harem, but we had other business to attend to. Our trip had two main purposes: Ariel was going to visit her ailing father, and then make a reservation for one of the palace's halls. My main role was just to follow her and Luke around.

As we made our way through the castle's hallways, I noticed something surprising.

Well... maybe it *shouldn't* have surprised me, but it did make me do a double take.

It was a painting of Perugius, hanging on the wall next to two others.

Dragonfolk tended to have similar faces; their features were even less distinctive in portrait form. This version of Perugius also looked a bit prettified, and several decades younger at least. Honestly, I didn't even recognize him at first. At first glance, I thought it was just someone who looked kind of similar, and my gaze slid right off his face. But then I saw the plate underneath the painting, and my eyes jumped back to it.

The name "Perugius Dola" was printed on that strip of metal. I blinked in surprise.

I guess the *most* surprising thing was that the painting was hanging very close to portraits of various Asuran kings and queens. It was a clear signal of just how important and respected the man was in this country.

The paintings to either side of Perugius depicted a human man I didn't recognize, and a man whose hair was a mix of silver and gold. Their faces weren't familiar to me, but given their positions next to Perugius, I knew who they were supposed to be. The human man was probably the North God Kalman, and the half-human was the Dragon God Urupen. These were portraits of the Three Godslayers from the Laplace War.

They hadn't *really* slayed the god in question, but I wasn't going to nitpick. From what Orsted told me, they'd fought very hard and ultimately defeated a truly terrifying opponent. The Demonic Dragon King Laplace was probably the most powerful man in the world for many years; sealing away half of him was one hell of an accomplishment. Perugius had earned his place of honor on these walls. To this day, the people of Asura still revered him as a living legend. I felt like I was finally beginning to understand just how hugely important it was that Ariel had earned his support.

For three days, things moved along smoothly enough.

Ariel was making steady progress in arranging for her gathering. The nobles who'd been waiting for her return stepped up to assist. In the course of my duties as a bodyguard, I'd been introduced to what felt like dozens of influential people. To be honest, I didn't remember any of their names.

I hadn't formally met High Minister Darius and First Prince Grabel. But I did see them at a distance, just once.

Darius was a flabby man with drooping jowls and a nasty gleam in his eyes. The very picture of a wily, gluttonous old monster, basically. I felt a bit of a connection to him, mostly based on his physical ugliness.

When he spotted me, though, his face contorted with terror. It was like he was seeing the grim reaper or something. Maybe it was unwise to read too much into that sort of thing, but... the man's reaction was so blatant that I just didn't feel the need to second-guess myself anymore. He was obviously one of the Man-God's three disciples.

First Prince Grabel looked like an ordinary enough man. The title *prince* made me think of some kid in their teens or twenties with fluffy golden hair, but he was just an average-looking bearded man in his mid-thirties. Still, when you studied his face closely, there *was* something about it that made you want to work for him. I guess he possessed a quiet kind of charisma.

Come to think of it, we'd heard some rumors about the Second Prince Halfaust as well; apparently he'd been outmaneuvered by Grabel and was currently under house arrest. Maybe Orsted had intervened somehow? Or maybe he'd just known it would play out this way? In any case, many of the nobles who'd backed Halfaust and seen their hopes of victory collapse instead flocked to join Ariel's

cause after her return. She had them helping out with the preparations for her big event.

The princess was fighting her own battles. My job was to eliminate the enemies who were trying to stop her by force.

We had, in fact, come under attack repeatedly. They sent hired killers our way every single day. That said, these assassins were nothing special—we hadn't baited our larger prey into action yet.

The assassins targeted exclusively Ariel. To be more precise, they went for Sylphie, who was now acting as her body double. They came at her on the streets, while she dined, and while she slept, never giving us a moment to relax.

Of course, the *real* Ariel wore a maid outfit and a wig, eating simple meals with the household staff (though the food was still better than what a low-ranked knight would get), and sleeping soundly every night in an ordinary servant's bed.

"They're actually sending way more at us than last time around, you know?" Sylphie had commented at one point. "It makes a huge difference having you and the others around, Rudy."

The assassins were well-organized, and weren't incompetent by any means. But with me, Eris and Ghislaine around, they couldn't put up much of a fight.

That said... if it were *just* me on defense, I probably would have struggled a little. Some of the assassins looked to be young boys, and I'd hesitate to kill them. In that sense, having Eris and Ghislaine with me was a great help.

So far, we hadn't encountered anyone those two couldn't easily cut down on their own. I had a feeling that the people sending these assassins were other nobles loyal to Grabel, rather than the prince or Darius themselves.

If Darius was truly determined to hold back *all* his firepower for the final showdown, we might have a problem on our hands.

Assuming Eris and Ghislaine would be occupied with the North Emperor and North King, the next enemy would head straight for me. And if they had enough people, Sylphie might come under attack as well. I wanted to believe that Orsted would intervene before things got out of hand, but we hadn't been able to speak since our party reached the city. I didn't even know if he was in Ars at the moment.

In any case... hoping for the best was no strategy. We needed to thin the ranks of our enemies somehow.

Just as I was starting to get antsy, Princess Ariel approached me.

"I've made the preparations for the stage," she said quietly.
"Now I think it's time we bait our trap."

That day, the princess made particular effort to speak with a noble loyal to the First Prince. During this conversation, she made a few vulgar jokes about how both Eris and Ghislaine were on their period today. The noble looked in Eris' direction with open interest; Eris answered with a hostile scowl.

Apparently, Ariel had decided to invite an attack by spreading word that her own bodyguards were in poor condition.

It didn't work, however. Maybe she'd been too obvious about it. From the next day on, even the ordinary assassins stopped showing up.

It was Day Five. The attacks on us had stopped completely.

In exchange, the enemy had begun to target some of the more influential nobles in Ariel's faction, specifically those who were making the arrangements for her "stage." These nobles had the means to defend themselves, and the attacks hadn't amounted to much. But several of them were frightened enough to switch their allegiance to the First Prince.

During this period, I finally met one of the major players in this struggle: Pilemon Notos Greyrat. Just as we'd heard, the man had abandoned Ariel to ally himself with Grabel.

Pilemon looked to be somewhere in his mid-thirties, and he bore a strong resemblance to Paul. But there was no hint of my dad's breezy confidence on his face. He struck me as a hesitant, fearful person, the kind of man who'd flee from any sign of danger like a mouse.

Personally, I didn't have a problem with cowards, but he sure looked like the kind of guy old man Sauros would have *loathed*. I could see why they'd ended up as enemies, and why Pilemon had taken advantage of the Displacement Incident to have Sauros killed. It made sense logically. But in all honesty, it was hard for me to believe that a man like this had been bold enough to murder such a powerful rival. If he had the guts to seize an opportunity like that, Sauros never would have hated him in the first place.

Luke and Pilemon had a long, heated discussion during our meeting. More of a *fight* than a conversation, really. Luke pressed his father to explain his betrayal, and why he would throw away their years of effort. Pilemon refused to even answer, saying only "You couldn't hope to understand my reasons."

Stunned and in disbelief, Luke still forged on, begging his father to rejoin Ariel's cause before it was too late. But his efforts came to nothing. In the end, a young man who seemed to be Luke's older brother asked scornfully if he was after their inheritance, then strode out of the room with Pilemon close behind.

Seemed like a pretty horrible way to treat your own son after he'd been struggling in a far-off land for nearly a decade. But Paul had been just as bad at one point, and I wasn't exactly a picture of virtue myself. The Asuran nobility seemed to have their own

particular set of values, none of which I understood, so maybe it wasn't fair for me to judge.

If Ariel triumphed, Luke would lead the Notos family as the man who'd emerged victorious from a dangerous conflict. If Grabel came out on top, that role would fall to his brother. Considering how serious the consequences might be for failure, their harsh attitude might be seen as a way of showing their concern.

There was also a chance they just hated Luke's guts, of course.

In any case, it seemed like Ghislaine was going to get her chance to kill Pilemon after all. Still... if Luke begged us to treat his family leniently, I'd be tempted to try and help him patch things up somehow. But another part of me didn't want to take that risk.

It was an ugly situation, any way you looked at it.

Nine days had passed, and our "stage" was finally ready.

Simply put, it was going to be a party. Drinks, dancing, chatting, that kind of thing. Such events were held regularly in the halls of the Silver Palace.

This one was publicly announced as an event to be held by Second Princess Ariel in honor of Prince Grabel. Since the names of *both* the leading candidates for the throne were on the invitations, all the major and prestigious nobles in Asura were expected to attend.

In the enemy's shoes, I wouldn't have bothered showing up for an event that was so obviously a trap, but I guess it wasn't that simple for members of the Asuran nobility. Appearing at parties of this kind seemed to be more or less their *duty*.

There had been several attempts to disrupt the preparations, but the princess had dealt with all of them efficiently.

Tomorrow would be the moment of truth.

“Sir Rudeus,” called Ariel, pulling me out of my thoughts. “I’ve just given them one final push.”

“Oh?”

“To be more specific, I’ve leaked some information that should make High Minister Darius *very* anxious.”

“...Right. I see.”

We were worried about Auber and his friends, but it was ultimately Darius who controlled them. And the disciples of the Man-God didn’t always behave exactly as he wanted. It was possible to make them ignore his words—especially out of fear, or acting in self-preservation. That was how I’d ended up swearing loyalty to Orsted.

Up until now, we’d just been giving them the opportunity to strike. Ariel was trying to convince them that they needed to *take* that opportunity, if they wanted to come out on top.

“Still, there are no guarantees. And if they don’t take the bait tonight...”

“Yeah. I know.”

In that scenario, we’d have to face their entire force tomorrow. That would make things very difficult. One of us might end up dying. It might be Eris, or Sylphie, or Ghislaine. I wanted to do everything I could to prevent that, but Paul’s face kept flashing through my thoughts.

I had to hope that the plan would work this time.

Later that evening, we made our way back to Ariel’s residence. It was a dark and moonless night. All our preparations were now complete; it was just a matter of waiting until tomorrow. We’d have to relax and get as much rest as we could tonight.

Or so I thought—until I spotted the man standing in middle of the road ahead of us. He had rabbitlike ears, so clearly a beastman. What was the name of this race, again? The Mildett?

If their women are bunny girls, I guess this would be a bunny boy?

“...”

The beastman wore black, non-reflective armor, and there was a straight sword in his hand. He stood right in the path of Ariel’s carriage.

“Who goes there?!” Luke demanded, moving forward from his place beside the carriage.

The beastman didn’t answer. But that wasn’t surprising. No assassin would ever—

“I am the North King Nucklegard, one of the three blades of the North God! They call me Twinblade!”

He actually gave us his name. Uh... okay.

A second later, our new friend Nucklegard began to *split apart*—one half of him moving slowly to the left, and the other to the right.

“Hey, Nuckle. I don’t think we’re supposed to tell them our names.”

“Oh, right! I guess things are kinda different this time, huh? You’re so smart, Gard.”

“Heheh! Well, I *have* been hitting the books lately...”

No, that wasn’t it. “Nucklegard” was actually a pair of twins. I was looking at two swordsmen with identical faces.

“Oh, and we probably shouldn’t tell them that it was Lord Darius who hired us, either!”

“You’re probably right. When we had to fight assassins, they’d never tell us who they worked for.”

“Yep, exactly. So make sure you keep it a secret, Nuckle!”

“Got it!”

They really weren’t very good at this whole being-an-assassin thing, were they? I mean, we already knew who’d hired them, so it didn’t *really* matter... but seriously.

As I stared at the two beastmen in disbelief, Eris spurred her horse forward, jumped to the ground, and drew her sword in one smooth motion.

“I’m Eris Greyrat,” she called.

The twin swordsmen’s ears twitched as they met her eager, aggressive gaze.

“Ooh! The famous Berserker Sword King!”

“Her skills sharp as a fang, her temper fierce as any monster!”

“We may be but a pair of puny Mildeitts...”

“But we will *gladly* take you on!”

Eris raised her sword over her head, and the twins assumed mirrored stances.

“Alone, we are only half a man.”

“Together, we are a man complete!”

“We shall fight you two on one—”

“But surely you’ll agree that this is only fair!”

Uh, no. That’s kind of the definition of unfair, actually...

At this point, another silhouette emerged from the darkness—this one in the street behind our carriage. It was a small figure; it wore a full-body suit of jet-black armor, and carried a black sword and shield.

He didn’t bother introducing himself. Not this time. Instead, he simply assumed his stance.

Ghislaine had already turned to face him. Betraying no surprise, she drew her own sword. “This time is going to be *very* different, halfling.”

“...You Doldia have excellent night vision, don’t you? I suppose I’m at a slight disadvantage tonight.”

It was Wi Taa.

During our battle at the Red Wyrm’s Whiskers, he’d held the upper hand against Ghislaine. But since then, I’d given her a basic rundown of his tricks and how to counteract them. I wasn’t sure how much of that she’d understood or memorized, but just knowing what he might try would make a big difference.

In any case, we were caught in a pincer with the bunnies ahead of us and the halfling behind. Somehow, it was hard to convince yourself that these three were any real threat, but the fact of the matter was that they were all North Kings.

I had to decide what to do. The cleanest option would be for me to support Eris. Sylphie or Luke could help Ghislaine. We’d even our numbers on one side, and have an advantage on the other. Unfortunately, I couldn’t act just yet. Auber was nowhere to be seen; and that was enough to keep me rooted in place.

Princess Ariel wasn’t here this time. She was heading from the palace to her residence using a secure alternate route. That meant that Sylphie *could* focus entirely on helping Eris, while Luke supported Ghislaine. But if the enemy saw us ignoring the carriage entirely, they would realize the princess wasn’t here—and in the absence of their target, they would retreat. One or two of them might even try to slow us down while the others went for Ariel. The princess was clever enough that they probably wouldn’t find her... but even so, our battle would be postponed until tomorrow. The enemy would be ready and waiting for us, and there would be more of them to deal with.

This was our chance. We had the opportunity to take out two North Kings... or three, I guess. But if we couldn't take advantage of it, we'd find ourselves in deep trouble tomorrow. At the very least, we needed to one of them out right now.

I could assist Eris while Luke supported Ghislaine. But in that scenario, Sylphie might have to fight Auber, and that was probably a losing battle. I wanted to believe that she could hold her own against him, but Orsted thought she wouldn't stand a chance.

It seemed like I had no choice but to stand around and—

“...No.”

Think, Rudeus.

On the face of it, the enemy had brought three North Kings against us... or two, depending how you counted. They didn't have that army of soldiers from last time, either. Would you really ambush your enemy with a force this much smaller? Auber *had* to be here right now. It was the only way any of this made sense. He was hiding somewhere near the battlefield at this very moment, calmly watching us and waiting for his chance to strike.

All I had to do was *find him*. Once I uncovered his hiding place, I could take him down with a single deadly spell. After that, there'd be no need to worry about giving the other fights my full attention.

“Don’t worry, Rudeus,” Eris said, her voice ringing through the darkness. “I can handle these two all by myself.”

It did seem like Nuckle and Gard were having trouble getting within range of her. I got the feeling that as *individuals*, they were North Saint level at best. And Eris was capable of cutting down a swordfighter of that rank in the blink of an eye. In other words, if they stepped into her range, one of them would die immediately. And even then, the other probably wouldn't be capable of killing her in return.

Ghislaine and Wi Taa were still standing at a distance also. Ghislaine was a tall woman, and Wi Taa was a halfling—her reach was *much* greater than his. It wouldn't be easy for him to slip into his attack range, either. The fact that they weren't just retreating felt like more evidence for my theory: they had another ally hiding somewhere. With Auber here, they had a good reason not to flee.

They had every intention of killing us all right here.

Think. Where the hell is Auber? How many hiding places are there nearby?

This didn't seem like an ideal spot for an ambush, in all honesty. There was a thick city wall to our left, and nobles' mansions to our right. At a glance, there could be many hiding places on the right. The mansions all had large gardens encircled by tall fences, and there was a dark alley or two in between the buildings. But this road was wide, and the mansions were all some distance from our carriage. It didn't seem like an ideal place from which to spring an ambush.

What about the city wall, then? You had to really crane your neck to see the top of it. Was Auber going to rappel down it... or maybe just leap down from the top? Sounded like suicide to me, but maybe a North Emperor could pull it off.

What about the ground? Could he be hiding under the surface somewhere, like he was last time? No, that seemed unlikely. After what happened last time, we'd been keeping a very careful watch on the ground around us. It was hard to think we'd somehow overlooked him.

Damn it, where is he? Do we have any major blind spots?

I was standing behind the carriage and to the left. Luke was positioned in front of it on the right. We had torches on the carriage *and* my lamplight spirit providing us with illumination. It was enough light that our jet-black enemies were clearly visible. In other words, there wasn't a single part of the battlefield that *none* of us could see.

Maybe he really is up on top of that wall. Should I hit it with a blast of magic...? I sent the lamplight spirit up into the air and scanned looming wall beside us again...

“...!”

And spotted him.

I hadn't noticed anything the first time I looked this way, but there was definitely *something* odd midway up the surface of the wall. It was covered in cloth the exact same color as the stone. In broad daylight, you would have spotted it immediately. The headlights of a car might have revealed it, too. But the torches on our carriage simply weren't bright enough to give him away. It was only thanks to my lamplight spirit that I'd seen that small hint of a shadow.

We'd won this fight.

Without a word, I pointed my staff at the cloth.

There was no need for an incantation. Normally, I announced my spells to alert my allies I was using them, but this time I wasn't going to do that, either. I was convinced that Auber would dodge my spell if I said a single word. But he wasn't ready for a total sneak attack. When you're planning to surprise your enemy, you don't expect them to surprise *you* instead.

Stone Cannon. Maximum power. Maximum speed... Go!

“Gwooooh?!”

I had not hesitated in the least. I'd fired off my spell as quickly as I could. And yet, Auber had anticipated it somehow. Maybe it was pure animal instinct, or some sixth sense he'd acquired over years of battle. At the very last instant, he'd leapt out of his hiding spot and evaded my attack.

No... he hadn't evaded it completely. My stone projectile struck him in the leg, tearing a great hole right through it. Auber tumbled off the wall, barely managing a defensive roll as he hit the ground.

"Gaaah!"

His appearance finally set the battle into motion. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Eris and Ghislaine moving, and Luke had noticed what was going on as well.

Without pausing, I fired off another Stone Cannon at Auber.

"Tch!"

Despite his crouched, awkward position, he deflected it without difficulty.

"Traaah!"

Luke came rushing up behind him; but Auber planted his left hand on the ground, spun his body on that axis, and sharply deflected the strike. He kicked Luke's unsteady legs out from under him and moved to finish the job immediately.

I put a stop to that with a well-placed Stone Cannon.

"Hnngh!"

Auber bent backward like a spring to avoid the spell, and finally leapt off the ground. The man could still fight, clearly. But with one of his legs disabled, his mobility had to be severely limited.

He stood on his good leg as steadily as a flamingo, and looked from me to the carriage, then its surroundings. I was compelled to follow his gaze.

The battle had been decided in the seconds since Auber hit the ground. Eris, good as her word, had already cut down both of her opponents, but she'd been badly wounded. Her left shoulder dangled loosely, and blood poured down her arm. Still, she'd turned her attention our way, and her eyes were fixed on Auber.

Ghislaine had overwhelmed Wi Taa as well. The halfling had lost one of his arms and his shield while Ghislaine didn't have a scratch on her. By the time I'd looked in their direction, she was moving forward to finish him.

Wi Taa screamed "Auberrrr!" at the top of his lungs and threw something to the ground. It hit the stones with a dull *fwump*, and a huge cloud of black smoke billowed out in all directions.

Orsted had warned me that Wi Taa used smokescreens at night, but I hadn't pictured anything like this. This smoke was *seriously* thick. He had to be using some kind of magic item or implement.

As I stared into the deep, black fog, I could hear Wi Taa running, with Ghislaine in hot pursuit.

A sword suddenly slices through the darkness in front of me.

I quickly hopped out of the way; a split-second later, Wi Taa came barreling past me. Was he after me? No, he was going for the carriage!

"I've got this!"

In the next instant, the carriage door swung open, and Sylphie rolled out while firing off a spell She'd chosen Flame Tornado, a combination wind and fire spell. It dispersed the black smoke instantly, and lit the whole area with a brief flash of light.

I took in the situation. Ghislaine, Luke, Sylphie, and Eris were all relatively fine. I caught a glimpse of Wi Taa disappearing into a nearby alley. Was he fleeing? Well... that wasn't the end of the world, as long as we could take down Auber.

But by the time I turned my attention back to the North Emperor, *he'd* vanished as well.

Where is he?!

"Rudeus!" shouted Eris, pointing upward.

I followed her gaze and spotted Auber scuttling up the city wall with his metallic claws like a cockroach. He moved with remarkable speed, reaching the top and disappearing entirely. I'd only looked away for an instant, but there was no chance we'd ever catch up with him now.

There was no time to beat myself up about it, though. Not right now. "Follow Wi Taa!" I shouted, sprinting for the alley.

It was a snap judgment call, and I doubted myself as I ran. Could we even catch him at this point? Should I have followed him the moment I saw him duck into that alley? The man had lost one of his arms. He couldn't be running that quickly in that condition, with his body so unbalanced... but then again, you never knew what these North God people might have trained themselves to do...

As I rounded the corner into the alley, I came to an abrupt halt.

Wi Taa was already dead.

He lay in a pool of blood with a gaping hole in his midsection. It was a very...familiar cause of death. I'd lost my own life this way, quite some time ago.

I sensed no one nearby. But clearly, someone *had* been here just moments ago.

Someone named Orsted.

"Rudeus! You got him, huh?"

I turned around. Eris stood behind me. Blood poured from that horrific gash in her shoulder, but she had a satisfied smile on her face.

"Uh... yeah..."

Before saying anything else, I reached out to touch her upper arm and murmured the incantation for a healing spell. It really was a terrible injury. Deep enough it could have severed a tendon. I knew

Eris didn't hesitate taking hits in battle, but this wasn't good for my nerves.

"Thanks," she said casually, then turned around and yelled into the main street. "That was Rudeus earlier! He took Wi Taa out for us!"

With that announcement, everyone finally exhaled in relief.

"My apologies. I only slowed the rest of you down."

"No, I'm to blame for this. If I'd only finished Wi Taa off, Rudeus could have kept his focus on Auber..."

"I probably should have jumped out of the carriage a little earlier, huh?"

"Hey, c'mon! One of them got away, but we did all right!"

As we bantered about what went down, we got to work cleaning up the bodies of our enemies. I had some regrets. Maybe I could have prevented Auber's escape if I'd been a bit more creative with my choice of spells. If I hadn't just *assumed* his mobility was gone, I could have thrown down a Quagmire right away.

Still, there was no point dwelling on it. The battle had been very brief, and somewhat chaotic. Dissecting every little choice we'd made wasn't particularly helpful. In the end, we'd killed the North King Wi Taa and the North King Nucklegard. That was two... or three, really... fewer enemies to worry about. Auber might have managed to escape, but we'd achieved our goal of thinning the enemy's ranks. It felt safe to call this a success.

Now we just had to win the final showdown, too.

Chapter 9: Ariel's Battlefield

OUR SETTING was one of the Silver Palace's grand reception halls, primarily used for large gatherings and parties. Today, there was a single long table in the room. It was adorned with large, beautiful flower arrangements; plates, glasses, and cutlery were already arranged on the tablecloth. All the seats were assigned beforehand to one of the expected guests. Once the party got underway, the food would presumably be carried out to them on silver platters.

The hall was so lavishly decorated that you'd never suspect that the whole event had been thrown together in just ten days. There was something thrilling about looking out over the room, ready and waiting for its guests, before anyone else arrived.

I was officially here as a member of the staff. Eris and I stood near the entrance to the waiting room, studying the faces of the attendees as they arrived. The waiting room itself wasn't too cramped. There was something of a pre-party going on there, with the guests milling around between tables of refreshments. Some of them wore eager, hopeful expressions. Others looked anxious. But many of them had arrived quite early.

Most of the conversation in the waiting room involved speculation about what Princess Ariel was going to say today, and how Prince Grabel's faction might react. The tone of that chatter was mostly light—probably because none of the big names had arrived. Most of the early guests were lesser nobles who wouldn't be too seriously affected regardless of who took the throne.

The first major player arrived a little late. It was Pilemon Notos Greyrat, accompanied by his eldest son.

Pilemon paused at the entrance to glare at me with undisguised hostility. "Hmph. Do you really think you can worm your way back into the Notos Greyrat house after all these years?"

I was a bit taken aback by the venom in his voice. "The idea never even crossed my mind, honestly."

"Remember this, boy: by all rights, you shouldn't even be permitted to call yourself a Greyrat."

"Uhm... right. Okay."

After delivering this confusing attempt at an insult, Pilemon studied the faces of the guests in the waiting room, and then disappeared into a private room reserved for the high nobility.

"What is his *problem*?" hissed Eris quietly. She seemed much more upset than I was.

Come to think of it... back when I was staying with the Boreas Greyrats as a kid, they all seemed to assume I was uncomfortable about my family's awkward social position. It didn't seem like a big deal at the time. But what if Paul had asked the Notos family to take me in, instead of the Boreas? What if I'd ended up tutoring one of *their* children? With the likes of Pilemon around, that might have been seriously miserable...

Well, it was all in the past now. Pilemon might be Paul's little brother and my uncle, but he was also an enemy Ghislaine would kill before too long. It was for the best that I couldn't stand the guy.

Following Pilemon's arrival, the rest of the important guests began showing up at a steady pace. The parents of Ariel's attendants and several members of Triss' family were among them. The other heads of the four great houses all showed up as well. The Euros clan came first, then Zephyros, and finally Boreas.

Who's the new head of the Boreas house again? Thomas? Gordon? It's definitely a talking train engine kind of name...

Oh, right. James.

Much like Pilemon, he'd strode into the room with his eldest son at his side. The man looked more like Sauros than Philip had, and he had a muscular build, but his face was noticeably haggard. From what Ariel told me, he'd resigned his post as a High Minister to assume his new role as the liege lord of Fittoa. Since everything in his territory had disappeared in the Displacement Incident, he was still struggling to get his feet under him.

In a way, it was impressive that the house of Boreas hadn't just folded under the pressure completely. Maybe they were leveraging the value of all their empty land somehow. Or maybe James was keeping them afloat through heroic personal effort.

...Heroic effort, huh?

Well... the redevelopment of Fittoa was proceeding very slowly, but the exhaustion on James' face was proof that he wasn't just sitting around all day. He probably had to fight hard for his own survival in the aftermath of that disaster. Although I wasn't sure how many of the victims of the disaster would feel *that* much sympathy for his position...

After a brief glance our way—at Eris, in particular—James headed to a private waiting room as well.

Finally, after everyone else had already shown up, High Minister Darius arrived. His only companion was a single bodyguard.

As soon as he laid eyes on me, Darius looked away with a fearful grimace. But the bodyguard headed in my direction.

It was interesting to get a good look at the man in broad daylight for once, although it didn't make him any less peculiar. He was dressed casually, his hair made him look like a poisonous mushroom, and there were four swords at his waist.

"It's a great pleasure to meet you, sir. I am the North Emperor Auber Corbett, although I'm commonly referred to as Peacock Blade."

I glanced downward and saw that Auber was standing comfortably on both legs. He didn't even seem to have a limp. But given how wealthy Asura was, it was no surprise they had healers who could patch up an injury like that in no time.

"The pleasure's all mine. I've heard quite a lot about you. My name is Rudeus Greyrat."

"Ah, Quagmire Rudeus... or, perhaps you'd prefer Rudeus the Dragon's Dog?"

Hmm. Would that make Orsted the new Kennel Master? How nostalgic. Back in my adventuring days I was the one holding the leash, but the tables had apparently turned. Orsted probably wouldn't bother trying to improve the reputation of my people, though...

"My apologies, sir," Auber continued with a smile. "I understand your party's come under attack several times in recent days?"

"...I'm afraid so."

"They say you warded off the cowardly ambushes of your opponents with great skill, however."

Uh, you're calling yourself a coward? Okay...

Auber was smiling lightly, like this was all just a little joke between us. But his eyes didn't look amused at all. "Next time, perhaps you'll have a fairer fight."

For just a moment, his face became uncharacteristically serious. And then he turned and walked away.

Was that his way of declaring war?

In our two encounters so far, he seemed to have targeted me in particular. Maybe he really *was* the third disciple.

In any case, the single most important guest, First Prince Grabel, wasn't coming to the waiting room at all. Instead, he was expected to show up directly in the main hall once the party began.

In other words, all the players were now assembled.

The party had now begun in earnest.

The nobles entered the hall in a specific order, and took their seats along the massive central table. I watched this all of this from the periphery of the room, where I stood along with many other bodyguards. Ariel had arranged it so that there were almost no palace guards on duty, so most of the nobles had brought their own. Eris and Ghislaine were by my side, keeping a wary eye on our surroundings.

Sylphie wasn't here at all. She had an important part to play in the ceremonies to come, and was currently waiting elsewhere.

Ariel stood behind the place of honor at the head of the table. Once all the guests had settled into their seats, she took a step forward.

"Thank you all so much for taking the time out of your busy schedules to attend this party."

At first, her speech of welcome was conventional enough. She began by mentioning the king's illness, made a few remarks about the state of things in Asura, and spoke about how she'd felt watching events from afar during her studies abroad... that sort of thing.

But soon enough, her attack began.

"Now then. There is a *specific* reason why I've gathered all of you here today, as it happens. I have two people who I'd like to introduce to you."

As Ariel spoke these words, a voluptuous woman in a beautiful dress stepped through the entrance. Without saying anything, she slowly strode across the hall to stand at Ariel's side.

When he got a look at her face, Darius' eyes went wide. A few other nobles at the table rose to their feet, the color draining from their faces. Those were probably the representatives of the Purplehorse family.

"This is Tristina, the second daughter of House Purplehorse. By sheer coincidence, I met her on my travels—in the most unlikely of places."

Plucking at the hem of her dress, Triss executed a flawless curtsy. It was far smoother than anything Eris could have managed, at the very least. "Thank you very much for the introduction, Your Highness. Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Tristina Purplehorse."

There was a stir of voices all around the hall. "Didn't she go missing?" "I thought she was dead!" "That girl's alive?" "She's certainly blossomed into a beauty..."

Within a few moments, however, the comments began to concentrate on one question in particular.

"But... what is she doing here?"

"When I found her and took her into my protection, Tristina was in a terribly weakened state," Ariel said. "But she told me that she had several things to say to all of you, and so I've brought her with me to this gathering."

Triss stepped forward right on cue—and approached Darius, who was seated at a high place at the table. Looking at him with the disdain of someone studying a particularly filthy pig, she began to tell her story.

She didn't speak in the rough tones of a bandit. Her words were clean, elegant, like those of a proper noblewoman. She spoke of her betrayal by her family, and of her purchase by High Minister Darius.

She spoke of how he'd kept her like a pet, a dog. And she spoke of how she'd nearly lost her life following the Displacement Incident.

She told the story of how she'd survived: the bandit gang that purchased her, and her life as their leader's plaything. Finally, she explained how Ariel had rescued her.

Triss delivered the entire (slightly dramatized) tale in a calm, steady tone of voice. It was a story carefully tweaked to tug at the heartstrings of anyone who heard it. She left out the part where she'd become a bandit herself, implying that she'd simply endured all the abuse until our party happened to rescue her.

A number of the nobles conspicuously broke into tears during the story. I had a feeling Ariel had asked them to do so beforehand. But many of the others, especially those allied with Darius, had clear expressions of shock and dismay on their faces. The members of the Purplehorse family in particular were white-faced with fear and sweating visibly.

Darius himself, however, maintained a placid expression. He gave no sign of losing his composure—on the surface, at least. It was the face of a man who'd slipped his way out of tougher spots than this before.

“And that’s the entirety of my story.”

Triss finally wrapped things up. And as she stepped back, Ariel moved forward.

“Now then,” the princess said, flashing her usual vibrant smile. “This is all *quite* surprising, Minister Darius. I certainly didn’t expect to have such shocking events revealed in front of everyone like this. It’s truly hard to believe... could you really have abused your power so blatantly? Kidnapped a girl of noble birth, and treated her as your personal slave?”

Her tone, calm at first, began to heat up rapidly as she continued. By now, she was spitting out the words at Darius with righteous fury in her voice.

“Is this *truly* how a High Minister of Asura comports themselves? Is this *truly* the behavior of a man who administers our entire kingdom? What an utter disgrace. Do you have anything to say for yourself, sir?”

With a disdainful snort, Darius rose slowly to his feet.

“Princess Ariel, you take your little games a bit too far today.” His narrow eyes shone with malice, he turned to face Triss. “I hardly expected you to grab some woman off the street and insist on calling her a daughter of House Purplehorse. Oh, I know that my enemies delight in spreading vicious rumors of this sort behind my back—but truly, this is the first time anyone has thrown such lies *directly* in my face.”

Chortling loudly, he turned to look around the room, silently encouraging the other nobles to agree that Triss was an impostor.

“You claim her story is untrue, then?” said Ariel.

“Naturally. Now, I have a question of my own for *you*, Princess Ariel. Do you have any proof whatsoever that this... Miss Tristina is indeed the second daughter of House Purplehorse?”

“Tristina.”

At Ariel’s prompting, Triss reached into the bosom of her dress and retrieved something.

It was a ring. It had a beautiful purple jewel at its center, with the image of a horse carved into its surface.

“Ah! An amethyst with the image of a horse. To be sure, that is what the members of House Purplehorse use to prove their identity.”

Darius had admitted all this easily enough, but his face hadn't lost any of its composure. If anything, his smile had grown even sharper and more hateful.

"I see, I see. Since this lovely girl carries that ring, it would seem she truly *is* a Purplehorse..." Pausing for effect, Darius looked over both Ariel and Triss like the dirty old man he was. "Or so one might initially believe."

The smug grin on his face in that moment was sickening to look at.

"As it happens," he continued, "I have news of my own to share concerning Tristina Purplehorse. I'm afraid she was identified quite recently."

"Identified?" said Ariel, tilting her head slightly.

"I'm sure you all remember, ladies and gentlemen, a certain operation we conducted in the capital about a month ago," said Darius. "Its purpose was to round up all the members of certain criminal organizations that had taken root within the royal capital. In the course of that exercise, I'm afraid that the *body* of Miss Tristina was discovered."

Ariel drew a sharp breath at this.

A month ago? He'd been preparing for this in advance, then?

"Of course, her signet ring had already been sold on the black market, so it was difficult for us to conclusively establish her identity. However, Miss Tristina's body had a distinctive feature that only her family knew about: a crescent-moon shaped birthmark at her breast..."

Now that was just a lie, wasn't it? Triss didn't have any birthmark of that kind. At least, not in any place that I'd seen... and she wore very revealing clothing.

"I believe the head of House Purplehorse will be able to confirm all this for us. Isn't that right, Lord Freitus Purplehorse?"

Still, we had no good way to prove that Darius was lying. If the head of House Purplehorse backed him up on this, this falsehood would become the truth. And if Darius then demanded that Triss expose her skin, he could "prove" her an impostor.

What now, Ariel? Were you ready for this one? Did we engrave seven scars on her chest just in case?

The princess still had her poker face smile on, but that didn't tell me much. Hopefully she wasn't screaming internally right now.

A man who seemed to be the head of the Purplehorse family rose quietly to his feet.

Studying him closely, I could see a definite resemblance to Triss...although his ashen face and quivering lips suggested he wasn't much like his brazen bandit of a daughter.

"Go on, Lord Freitus. You identified the body yourself, didn't you? You know as well as I do that Tristina is deceased, not missing."

Like a devil whispering in your ear, Darius murmured his words in an almost soothing tone. The smile he'd turned on Freitus was probably an *attempt* at looking friendly.

"The woman standing before you is an impostor who has assumed Tristina's name. Perhaps you could testify to that effect, sir? If only to bring an end to this distasteful farce? Unless you do so, I'm afraid we'll have to ask the lady to expose herself in public, which would be most regrettable."

Darius looked completely sure of himself. Ariel's slight smile hadn't left her face, either.

Freitus, on the other hand, was trembling like a newborn calf. The tension in the air was thick. I was just looking on from the sidelines, and my mouth had grown completely dry.

“M-My daughter...”

Slowly, haltingly, Freitus began to speak.

“My daughter was stolen from us... by Minister Darius...”

His words were... not exactly what I’d been expecting.

“Lord Freitus!” shouted Darius. “What are you saying?!”

“That woman standing there is my daughter, Tristina Purplehorse! There’s no doubt in my mind! Princess Ariel, I beg you—give this man his rightful punishment for the abduction and abuse of my child!”

Darius leaned forward over the table, knocking his chair back in the process. “Don’t be absurd, Freitus! You placed your seal on that identification document *personally!*”

Ariel smiled very slightly. “No such document exists, Lord Darius.”

“Wha—”

Ah, okay. Now I get it. Sure, that makes sense...

Ariel had already won over House Purplehorse to her side. She’d anticipated the kind of trick Darius might pull, and she’d undermined it in advance.

I had a lot to learn from this woman. Seriously.

“Now then, High Minister. Given this testimony from the head of House Purplehorse...”

Ariel still had her smile pasted on her face, but I was starting to sense some malice of her own behind it.

“It seems that you truly did kidnap, imprison, and rape an innocent girl of noble birth. Regardless of your importance to this kingdom, such crimes *cannot* be excused. I expect you will be punished in accordance with our laws.”

Darius' face contorted horribly in fear and rage, and his eyes darted around the room. He no longer had a single ally sitting at that table. Now that he'd been outplayed this thoroughly, his fall was guaranteed. If his old friends had risen to his defense, perhaps he could have wriggled free. But it seemed like none of them wanted to assume the risk of being branded as his co-conspirator.

There was an easy explanation for this: they believed that First Prince Grabel was now assured the throne, even without Darius' help. The foundations for their victory had been laid by Darius and Grabel in Ariel's absence, and those foundations were solid. Basically, Darius' removal from the board at this stage would only change one thing: all of them would move up one rank in the hierarchy of their faction. And whoever managed to secure Darius' former position would become the most powerful noble in all of Asura.

All of the High Minister's former allies, the men and women who'd eaten from his hand for years, had now abandoned him.

Darius was done.

Ariel had destroyed him. At this point, she could probably just step back, and the other nobles would drag him down all on their own. Even if he got off lightly in court, no self-respecting member of the Asuran aristocracy would miss a chance to crush one of their own.

There was only one person at this party who'd be inconvenienced by Darius' fall. Someone who risked having his role in the man's many schemes exposed.

"This party seems more... boisterous than I'd expected."

The man in question had now appeared. It was almost like he'd been waiting for this very moment.

A blond, middle-aged man with a businesslike face. And his name was First Prince Grabel.

Entering the room from behind the seat of honor, he fixed his eyes sharply on Ariel—but kept his face calm and neutral.

Round two was about to begin.

Grabel Zafin Asura strode straight toward his younger sister without sparing a glance for anyone else in the room.

“What’s the meaning of this disgraceful commotion, Ariel? Have you forgotten that our father is seriously ill?”

“What commotion? I’m simply defending the honor of our nobility as a whole.”

“I’m saying there’s a *time* and a *place* for these things,” Grabel said, shaking his head irritably. “With our father incapacitated, the Kingdom of Asura can hardly afford to lose the many talents of our High Minister.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not. Either way, his crimes are real.”

“Even if these accusations are true, Darius is a high noble, and the members of House Purplehorse are of the middle rank. It should be obvious which of them is more valuable to our kingdom.”

In my previous life, where we’d come around to saying everyone was equal, a remark like that would have gotten this guy fired from his job in no time. But this was the Kingdom of Asura; people were definitely *not* born equal here, and no one pretended that they were.

“I don’t dispute that, Grabel. But while I hesitate to repeat myself: *his crimes are real*. As a kingdom of laws, we can’t simply ignore them.”

“And so he must be punished? I see. You’re not entirely wrong, Ariel... But you know as well as I do that there are many others in this

room who ought to have their deeds exposed and punished. Do you intend to toss every one of them into a jail cell?”

“Of course. If it becomes necessary.”

Reading between the lines just a little there, Ariel was promising that she *wouldn’t* punish anyone who was “necessary” to her. Nobody batted an eye at that, of course. It was amazing just how stinking rotten this kingdom really was.

“Hmph. So you’re convinced that punishing Darius is *necessary*, then. And I believe the opposite.” With a small snort of laughter, Grabel smiled condescendingly at his sister. “It seems we’re at something of an impasse, then!”

“I suppose we are,” Ariel replied.

Shaking his head theatrically, Grabel finally turned his attention to the others in the room. “Regrettably, the two of us are unable to reach a decision on this matter. The High Minister would usually mediate such disputes, but as this concerns him personally...”

Pausing, he looked around the table, studying the faces of the nobles one by one.

What’s he up to now?

“In accordance with custom, we ought to put the matter to a vote. Conveniently, it seems we have nearly all of Asura’s foremost men and women in this very room. Would you all be so kind as to decide which of us is in the right?”

It sounded almost democratic. But of course, he was only talking to the aristocrats. And what he was really asking them was: “Do you think I’m going to win this fight, or Ariel?”

There was an unspoken threat there, too. Anyone who voted against Grabel was going to be added to his list of enemies, and likely purged from power once he had the chance.

The nobles didn't seem particularly startled by this development. They'd probably known something like this would happen in the near future. Maybe a similar event had taken place before, when Grabel was competing with the Second Prince.

In any case—they were going to decide, here and now, which side they were really on. Many of them had been secretly allied to one faction or the other for some time now, but this would be a *public* declaration of their loyalties. They were going to evaluate the situation as it stood, and make their decision on that basis.

Darius was broken. That was a serious loss for Grabel's faction. However, they still had numerous other nobles of great influence and power on their side. That included Notos and Boreas of the four great houses, alongside several other high nobles.

Grabel's forces were simply stronger. His victory was essentially guaranteed.

But just as the nobles were beginning to reach this conclusion, Ariel spoke up with a bright smile on her face. "That sounds very reasonable, Grabel. But before we come to that, there *was* one other person I wanted to introduce to everyone."

"What?"

Ariel snapped her fingers. Ellemoi, who'd been waiting on the terrace outside, sent the signal using her ring.

With an ear-splitting roar, a huge column of fire spiraled up into the air just beyond the palace windows.

It was the Intermediate spell Flame Pillar, its size greatly magnified through the use of silent spellcasting techniques. The flame rose on and on into the sky, scorching the palace walls as they went. Probably went without saying, but this was all Sylphie's handiwork.

"What is the meaning of— Wha—?!"

“Hm?!”

“It can’t be!”

The nobles had risen to their feet to watch the flames go by. The spell itself hadn’t astonished them, however. It was easy enough to see magic of that quality in the capital of Asura, if you wanted to. Instead, their eyes were fixed on what was *beyond* it. Something massive moved through the night sky, illuminated by the soaring flames. And it was something you didn’t see every day, even in a city like Ars.

“Is that the *floating fortress*?!”

“When did it arrive in Asura?!”

The floating fortress Chaos Breaker had made its arrival.

Perugius’ majestic castle approached at a speed that was downright frightening, flying so low that it seemed likely to smash right into us. And as the trembling aristocrats watched, riveted, through the windows...

It stopped right above us.

The floating fortress hung in the sky just above the Silver Palace.

The room had gone absolutely silent.

I found myself wondering exactly how Perugius was planning to get down here. He wasn’t going to *jump* or anything, right?

Don’t be stupid, Rudeus... The guy’s an expert on Summoning and Teleportation. He can probably beam himself down here just fine.

“Wait... is *he* coming?!”

“...”

“No, that can’t be true... and yet...”

The nobles were beginning to whisper to themselves now, the tension and fear on their faces giving way to excitement as they stared outside the windows.

Ellemoi had positioned herself by the door at the foot of the hall. Some of the aristocrats seemed puzzled by this—someone murmured “Wouldn’t he enter by the seat of honor?”—but no one had an explanation for them.

After a little while, we heard footsteps approaching. Based on that sound, it seemed there was only one person out there. But as some of the bodyguards had clearly sensed, he wasn’t actually alone.

There were *twelve* others silently accompanying him.

Those who’d noticed this were trembling where they stood. They’d realized that the stories were true.

The footsteps stopped just outside the door.

“Our guest has arrived,” said Ellemoi. It seemed like everyone in the room was holding their breath now.

But when that door finally swung open, the mood changed immediately.

“...Oh! Oh! It’s him! It’s truly him!”

A silver-haired, golden-eyed man in a white cloak walked into the room. He wasn’t a perfect match for his portrait, true; but his overpowering *presence*, and the twelve servants who followed close behind him, left no room for doubt.

Some of those who saw him shuddered, or flinched in fear. Others stared with deep respect and admiration in their eyes. Indifferent to all of this, he strode across the room, parting the crowd of nobles as he went.

Finally, he reached Ariel and Grabel.

His twelve spirits split into two groups of six, and positioned themselves on either side of the hall. One group now stood beside

me, Ariel's bodyguard; the other beside Auber, who served Darius. Sylvaril, who looked a little dressed up for the occasion, took the spot directly at my side. It was hard to say for sure because of his mask, but I had a sense he was in an unusually good mood.

"My thanks for your kind invitation, Ariel Anemoi Asura... But it seems I'm a bit late for the party, perhaps?"

"Not at all. The guest of honor should always be the last to enter."

Perugius had a small smile on his face, and Ariel was beaming with delight.

Grabel, on the other hand, seemed to have no idea what to do with himself. He was just staring at Perugius with his eyes wide open.

Turning his way, Ariel called out in a voice that rang with confidence. "Everyone, allow me to introduce you to the Armored Dragon King—one of the legendary Three Godslayers."

Perugius didn't bow, but simply ran his eyes over the crowd in the manner of a lord. As the nobles met his gaze, they dropped hurriedly to their knees and bowed their heads in tribute.

"Greetings. I am Perugius Dola."

It was almost comical how good he was at the role of king. He had real authority here. Real prestige. In terms of clout, he might command even more than the *actual* king.

"Now then, everyone, please do raise your heads. I join you tonight as a guest, nothing more, nothing less. There's no need to show such deference to a man you'll soon break bread with."

At these words, the nobles rose uncertainly to their feet. Soon, the guests had all taken their places once again.

"Oh?" said Perugius, looking around the table curiously.

There were only three open seats remaining: the place of honor at the very head of the table, and two others to the side. Three attendees were still standing. Ariel, Grabel, and Perugius himself.

“Well, this is something of a problem. It seems we only have three seats available. Tell me, Ariel Anemoi Asura, Grabel Zafin Asura—which of them should I occupy?”

Grabel inhaled sharply, and others at the table swallowed audibly. This was all a farce. And if I knew that, so did everyone else in the room. They’d all picked up on who Perugius had spoken to, and *in what order*.

“By all means... please take... the seat of honor, Lord Perugius,” said Grabel, his voice trembling.

He couldn’t have said anything else in that moment. He was as overwhelmed as anyone else. Perugius had no authority to decide the next king, or to assign himself a seat at this table. There was no *need* for Grabel to yield so easily.

Someone at the table could have pointed this out. Ordinarily, someone *would* have. But in this moment, most of the guests were incapable of considering the matter so calmly and so coldly. There were probably a few exceptions, but they were too reluctant to swim against the current and place themselves in danger.

By this point, they understood *why* Ariel had destroyed Darius just before she staged this scene.

Perugius spoke, in a tone of voice that was almost casual, and no one dared to interrupt him.

“No, I think not. I’ve spent too many years away from this country to plant myself in the seat belonging to its next ruler.”

Reaching over, he pushed gently at Ariel’s back—at the same time as he spoke the words *next ruler*.

"Ariel, you take it instead. I'll content myself with the chair at your side."

In that moment, every noble in the room *knew* that Ariel would be queen.

Ariel had triumphed.

She had used me to ward off Auber, her own talents to control Luke, Triss to bring down Darius, and Perugius to defeat Grabel. And now her victory was assured.

Of course, she'd probably have many other battles to fight in the coming years. But in this moment, she had triumphed. Darius and Grabel had no cards that could trump Perugius.

But of course, those two weren't the *only* players in this game.

"...Lord Perugius!"

Just as Sylvaril cried out those words, the ceiling of the hall caved in.

A grand chandelier smashed to the ground, crushing a noble underneath it. Flying fragments of stone and metal wounded several others.

The scale of the damage wasn't particularly large. It was only the section of ceiling at the very center of the table that had fallen.

No—it wasn't the ceiling that had fallen. It was a woman. She'd plunged down from above, ripping straight through it. She was small in stature, and her skin was wrinkled with age. She held her gorgeous golden-yellow sword as if it was a walking stick.

There was a *little old lady* standing in the middle of the rubble.

"Good grief. Guess this is what that prophecy was about..."

She murmured to herself as she hopped down onto our stage. And with a fierce glance around the room, she called out to one player in particular.

“Well, I suppose I’m here to save you.”

It was the Water God Reida Lia, and she’d spoken those words to *Darius*.

The Man-God had just played his final card.

Chapter 10: **Rudeus's Battlefield**

THE WATER GOD STYLE has five secret techniques of great power. All were created by the first Water God to ever hold that title.

It's said that anyone capable of using three out of the five is worthy of the title of Water God. In the long history of the style, there were numerous Water Gods who managed to learn four—but none except the first had ever mastered all five. The Water God Reida Lia was no exception to the rule. She had learned only three of the five techniques, like many of her predecessors.

Reida was an old woman now. Her peak physical years had long since passed, and with every year her strength and agility declined further.

Why, then, did she still possess the prestigious title of Water God?

Was she simply immensely talented?

That was part of it, of course. Reida Lia had been a true prodigy in her youth, and her natural gifts were comparable to those of any Water God who'd gone before her. But her talents alone weren't enough to compensate for the ravages of age.

Were there no others skilled enough to claim the role?

Far from it. By now, there were several other living swordmasters who'd learned three of the Water God's secret techniques. And yet, none of them had even tried to succeed Reida as the Water God. Calling themselves unworthy of the title, they'd left it in Reida's hands and content themselves with the rank of Water Emperor.

But why?

It was because Reida had mastered the *two most difficult* of the five secret arts. And by cleverly combining these two, she had created something of her own: a skill that might be called an illusion of sorts... or perhaps the sixth secret technique.

It was known as the Blade of Deprivation, or the Deprivation Field. With a certain stance, she could cut down anyone within a certain range around her—no matter where they were positioned. The zone of effect was a perfect sphere with Reida at its center. When anyone within that zone took a single step, she could *instantly* counterattack them.

“Don’t any of you move a muscle, now. Unless you *want* to end up like them.”

The first to react to Reida’s sudden appearance had been Arumanfi the Bright, one of Perugius’ loyal servants. In the blink of an eye, he’d moved directly behind the old woman—only to be cut cleanly in two. His lifeless body had dissolved into particles of light and disappeared.

The next was Trophymus the Wave. He’d raised his hand toward Reida and tried to fire something at her. Maybe he’d even gotten the attack off. But Reida simply turned her sword briefly, and Trophymus was cut in half as well.

The next was me. I fed a pulse of mana into a ring on my finger, and Reida instantly cut my left hand off... or would have, at least, if it wasn’t for the magically-enhanced gauntlet I was wearing. Her blade had struck it at the fingers, partially destroying it; I’d frozen in shock.

The next was one of the high nobles at the table. He’d leapt to his feet and tried to flee, only to have the tendons in his leg severed. A second blow knocked him out, silencing his screams. Reida had used the blunt side of her sword.

None of the bodyguards could move. Neither could Eris, who you might have expected to jump in first. Neither could Ghislaine, or Ariel, or Perugius, or his surviving spirits.

And neither could I.

Reida had us pinned in place like insects on a board. We'd all realized, by now, that this *entire room* was within her range. Any movement, any attempt at action, would instantly be fatal.

"...Looks like everyone's frozen up. All right then. Auber?"

When Reida turned her gaze his way, Auber was standing stiffly in place just like everyone else. Even a swordsman of his caliber couldn't break free of Reida's overwhelming power.

"Wh-What can I do for you, madam...?"

"You can cut off a couple heads, for starters. Let's see... Go kill Ariel and Perugius. And Quagmire, too."

With that, Auber became the one and only person in the room capable of movement. But instead of stepping forward, he stared at Reida with an uncertain expression on his face. "You... you want *me* to do this?"

"Use your head, boy. Who else is gonna do it?"

"But..."

Auber shot a quick glance at Eris. Watching this from the corner of her eye, Reida spat scornfully onto the floor.

"I guess having that girl on the other side was always gonna be a problem, huh? No wonder both your ambushes were so half-assed. Even cowards like you want to play the swordsman for their students."

The harsh words spilled from Reida while she remained stationary, in the exact same stance.

“Look, kid. What did you take that fat sack of money for, anyway? You just here to cash in on your fancy title, let *three* of your old buddies die, and then watch your client get his head cut off?”

“...”

“Aren’t you supposed to be the guy who fights dirty?”

“...I suppose you’re right.”

With that, Auber moved into action. He drew a sword with his right hand and began to walk toward the head of the hall, where Ariel was standing.

Shit. What now? What do I do? I can’t move!

The Man-God had outplayed us this time. By dropping a single swordmaster in at the perfect time, he’d turned the tables in an instant.

Orsted had told me how to deal with the Water God in battle. His advice, basically, was to make sure I never let this happen. The instant you spotted her, you were supposed to get outside of her range of vision before she could assume her stance. It didn’t matter which way you fled; the most important thing was to move while you still could.

Too late for that now, though.

“...Good lord! What’s going on here?!”

At this point, a group of guards who’d presumably heard the commotion burst into the hall. They were knights in silver armor... who looked kind of familiar, actually.

“D-Drop your swo—”

“Don’t any of you move!”

Reida’s voice, fierce as thunder, stopped the group of novice knights in their tracks. But one among their number ignored her warning. Taking several steps forward into Reida’s zone of control, they pulled off their helmet and tossed it to the ground.

It was Isolde Cluel, the Water King.

What was she doing here? There weren't supposed to be any knights on duty inside the palace tonight. Ariel had seen to that. Was this Darius' doing? Maybe he'd positioned a group of novices nearby, on the off chance it would come to this. Or was it just a coincidence?

"Master Reida! What... What on *earth*..."

"Ah. Hey there, Isolde..."

"Why are you using your technique in the middle of this gathering?!"

"Calm down, girl. I'll explain... What you're seeing here is a horrific crime, perpetrated by Reida Lia and Auber Corbett."

"What...?"

Isolde furrowed her brow in confusion, but Reida kept right on talking.

"You see, the two of them were working on behalf of... let's say the King Dragon Realm, why don't we? Dazzled by promises of great wealth, they agreed to assassinate all the major nobles in Asura. But after murdering Ariel and a few others, Reida was cut down by a novice knight who happened to be posted nearby. Isolde Cluel becomes a hero, and the Water God Style lives on."

With a small laugh, Reida paused to glance toward the First Prince.

"Pretty solid story, if I do say so myself. Do me a favor and go with something like that, Grabel."

"What are you saying, Master?! Have you lost your mind?!"

Isolde started to take another step forward, but stopped in mid-stride. She'd probably sensed that Reida was now prepared to cut her down, just like all the others.

"...Do it, Auber. And make it snappy."

“...”

“What, you think you’re gonna hurt the North God Style’s reputation or something? Too damn bad. I’m cleaning up *your* mess here, boy! Hurry up and grow a pair!”

Auber lifted his sword and turned back towards Ariel, but then he paused and shook his head indecisively. The man was obviously conflicted.

“Why are you just standing there, Auber?!” screamed Darius. “Kill Ariel *now!* And that lying harlot, too!”

Was he talking about Triss? It made sense that he’d want her dead too. If any evidence remained of his crimes, the other nobles could use it to undermine him in the future. Even after Grabel took the throne. “Don’t worry about what happens next! I’ll take care of everything!”

For whatever reason, Darius’ words seemed to help Auber finally make up his mind. His face took on a slightly different expression, and he turned back toward Ariel.

Shit. Is this it? Are we done?

“Tch...”

I could see Eris bracing herself to move—to risk everything in a last-ditch attempt to escape Reida’s zone of control.

“No, Eris.”

“But—”

“Please. Don’t.”

“...So what *do* we do, then?”

I didn’t want to watch Eris die. But she did have a point. What were we supposed to do here? I had no good answers. What if we all acted, at once? No, that wasn’t going to work. This wasn’t a technique you could overcome that easily. And while I was relatively close to Reida, the others were just too far away.

Could Perugius do something? He hadn't moved an inch this entire time. Right now, he seemed to be staring in my direction with a vaguely bored expression. I could almost hear him saying "And what do you intend to do about this disgraceful state of affairs, Rudeus Greyrat?"

Considering that two of his subordinates had just died, he didn't look *remotely* concerned. Did he have some sort of plan in mind? No, I couldn't put my faith in that possibility. There was no time for wishful thinking. Auber was seconds away from killing Ariel, and I *had* to do something about it.

I had to act. It was the only option. And I had to attack both Auber and Reida at the same time.

The best option was my Electric spell. I'd be hitting others in the area as well, but I couldn't afford to care right now. Even if it didn't take Reida or Auber out, there was a chance that the shock would leave them stunned. Masters of the Water God Style were capable of deflecting magic itself, so the odds of success weren't great... but there was a *chance* it would work.

"Rudeus...are we doing this?"

Eris had read my thoughts from the expression on my face. Her fingers twitched slightly as she sent me a meaningful look. Apparently, we'd be dying together.

Sorry, Sylphie. Give me a nice funeral, all right?

"Hm?!"

But just as I was bracing myself to act, I felt a *jolt* in the core of my body.

"Good lord, is that...?"

Auber had flinched violently and stopped in his tracks. A great bead of sweat rolled down Reida's face.

It wasn't just those two who'd been affected. Almost everyone in the room had begun to tremble. Their faces had gone pale, and their bodies were visibly quivering, even as they stood immobile, frozen in place by Reida's sword.

A wave of relief washed over me. Apparently, I'd succeeded in passing mana to my ring.

"Well, *this ain't good*," muttered Reida. "Now I really wish you'd kept your trap shut about killing the princess, Darius..."

"...Wh-What is this? What's happening?!" Darius yelped. "Why can't I stop shivering?!"

"Change of plans, Auber. Hate to do this to you, but can you grab Darius and make a run for it? *Right now*, please."

Auber blinked in confusion. "But why Darius, rather than Prince Grabel?"

"I might be an old bag of bones, but I've still got a debt or two that needs repaying," said Reida with a small smile. "Go on, get moving! At this rate, *everyone* in the room's gonna end up dead."

Auber considered this for just a moment, then nodded. He darting over to Darius, grabbed him by the arm and dragged his weighty body away from the table.

"This way, sir."

"V-Very well..."

The two of them disappeared through the closest door, different from the one the novice knights had used to enter. No one could stop them. Reida still had all of us totally pinned down.

A heavy silence settled over the hall.

"Good grief. Wonder how far they'll manage to get? No guarantee he'll even come for me first, now that I think about it..."

"...Why him?"

As the Water God muttered to herself, someone else had spoken up. It was Ariel. Her expression had remained steady and composed this entire time, even in the face of death. But she seemed genuinely puzzled by Reida Lia's attempt to save Darius' life. It didn't make much sense to me either, to be honest.

"Why, why, why! Everyone's so damn *nosy* today... Look, there's nothing that interesting about it, all right?"

Reida smiled to herself for a moment, looking genuinely amused, and then continued.

"Here's a little story for you. This was way back when a certain old lady was just a scrawny kid. Everyone was calling her a *prodigy* at the time, and lord, was that ever going to her head... One day, this girl beat the tar out of some snotty noble in her training hall. Then he came back for revenge with about two dozen friends. She was down and out in no time, and they were just about ready to cut off both her arms. So she could never hold a sword again, see? And that was when this noble boy who outranked the other kid showed up. And saved her."

...Wait, what? This was Darius?!

"When the girl made it all the way to Water King and got picked to be the royal sword instructor, she went looking for that boy to express her gratitude. But by that point, he'd already turned into a selfish blob of a man with all the charm of a jellyfish. Didn't even remember her."

...Hm.

"You better believe she was disappointed. I mean, this guy never had a pretty face, but she'd taken him for the pure, good-hearted type, at least. Sometimes she'd even done a bit of girlish daydreaming about their reunion."

Reida seemed to be looking far off into the distance. I was *almost* tempted to think it might be safe to move.

"Anyway, the girl's first love ended then and there...but I wouldn't say it turned to hate, exactly. Her gratitude and disgust cancelled each other out."

The Water God told her story. Briefly, in the little time she had. Knowing that her audience wouldn't care. Almost like she was making a confession.

"To tell the truth, she forgot about all this herself. But on the road to Asura many years later, she got this peculiar message in her dreams. Told her she'd get the chance to repay the man, if she went back to serve the royal court one last time."

She was the Man-God's pawn after all. And right now, the man who wanted to destroy her master was heading straight this way. I could feel his overwhelming, terrifying aura growing stronger as he rushed through the palace with incredible speed. Auber would be running in the exact opposite direction. I didn't have the ability to keep track of his location, but I felt confident of that. The man had a sixth sense for danger, after all.

"What a joke, right? All this for some man she'd forgotten years ago."

Silence.

"But when she looked back on it, now that she was old and grey... putting all that silly romance business to one side... she realized that the debt she owed was never actually paid. It was just sitting there for decades, accumulating interest."

Reida paused for a moment, and then her eyes snapped fully open.

"...Looks like he's here."

The door to the hall burst open, and a single man walked inside.

"Eeeee!"

Everyone in the room flinched in terror at the sight of him. Some lost control of their bladders. Others collapsed to the ground. Some glared at him like he was their mortal enemy. But all of them were thinking the same thing, more or less: *He's going to kill us all.*

Like Perugius, his hair was silver, and his eyes were golden. But his face was horrifyingly fierce.

Orsted had finally arrived.

"It's been a while, Dragon God. Here to take an old lady to the afterlife?"

"Yes. You're a disciple of the Man-God. That means you die."

"A disciple, eh? Hmm...so you let me off the hook before because I *wasn't* a disciple then? Good lord. Guess I'll go out fighting one hell of an opponent, at least."

With a quick glance around the room, Orsted began to walk in a straight line toward Reida. He didn't even hesitate.

"Deprivation Field!"

Reida's sword became a *blur*, its shape shifting with impossible speed. Every time Orsted took a step, the blade struck at him with a golden flash, briefly connecting them with an illusionary yellow string.

And yet, Orsted warded off every blow. Sparks danced in the air around him.

He was deflecting her slashes with his bare hands.

One step. Two steps. Three. As he grew closer, the air filled with bigger and greater sparks. Reida's strikes were growing steadily more powerful.

Still, Orsted didn't stop. In no time at all, he was right in front of Reida.

"Die."



And just like that, it was over. Orsted's spear-hand strike punched straight through Reida's chest, and he tossed her body to the side like a rag doll.

"No! Master Reida!" screamed Isolde.

The Water God's deadly zone of control had disappeared. Still, no one moved. It was as if time had stopped entirely inside that room. Nobody understood what had just taken place. But their minds were consumed with the fear they might be next.

Isolde was the first to break the spell. Her legs trembling, she drew her sword and pointed it at Orsted.

"How dare you... How *dare* you!"

His face a mask of indifference, Orsted stepped out onto the terrace and leapt off it into the open air. Isolde sprinted toward the terrace in pursuit.

"Sir Rudeus!" shouted Ariel, abruptly snapping out of her own paralysis. "You must follow Darius and Auber! We can't allow them to escape!"

With those words, *everything* was suddenly in motion.

The nobles of Asura tripped over each other in their desperate scramble to escape. The bodyguards hurried to their sides. And Eris, Ghislaine, and I rushed to the nearest exit, following the path Auber and Darius had taken.

"R-Rudy?! What just happened in there?!"

We nearly ran right into a very startled Sylphie in the doorway. I considered taking her with us for a moment, but quickly decided against it. Isolde was still in the hall, staring down from the terrace in a state of shock. It seemed she'd given up on catching Orsted, but...

"Sylphie, you stay with Princess Ariel! Keep an eye on Isolde—she might try something! We're going after Darius!"

"Got it!"

Leaving Luke and Sylphie behind to protect the princess, the rest of us burst out of the room and took off running.

I wasn't entirely sure why Ariel had told us to follow Darius with such urgency in her voice. It felt like the outcome of our contest was basically decided at this point. A part of me wondered if it would *really* make a difference if Darius got away, but maybe that was just because I'd heard the Water God reminisce about their past together.

There was another reason Ariel might have given that order. She was a sworn follower of the Dragon God now, just like me. Maybe she felt we couldn't risk allowing a disciple of the Man-God to escape.

Either way, we *were* going to kill Darius. That had always been the plan.

"This way!"

Guided by Ghislaine's nose, we sprinted down the endless hallways of the palace with almost reckless speed. Eris and Ghislaine hadn't questioned Ariel's order at all. The enemy had fled, so we were going to hunt him down and kill him—for them, it was probably just that simple.

There were few guards in the hallways. We did see some on occasion, but they seemed to be busy chasing someone else entirely. I heard one of them shout "He fled toward the king's residence!" so it might well have been Orsted.

"...I see them!"

Without anyone to interfere, we caught up with our prey in a matter of minutes. Darius was wheezing loudly as Auber carried his sizable bulk through the hallway ahead of us.

"Tch!"

With a sharp glance back in our direction, Auber pulled Darius onto his shoulder and fled into the nearest room.

We caught up within seconds and burst inside—then stopped in our tracks. Darius was sitting flat on the floor, and Auber was standing in front of him, waiting with his sword already drawn.

“...Kuh, guuh! Gahaah... haah...”

From his awkward seated position, the High Minister of Asura stared up at us furiously.

“Th-This can’t be happening,” he muttered. “It’s wrong, all wrong...”

“Come now, Lord Darius. Sometimes life doesn’t play out exactly as we wish it,” said Auber calmly. “Perhaps it’s time to accept things as they are, and try to think our way out of this dilemma?”

“I did everything as God commanded me!” Darius objected, his face quickly taking on a crimson hue. “It’s not *right* that I should be cornered like a rat!”

“...Goodness, you’re certainly a pious one. In that case, perhaps try to catch your breath and say a few prayers for my victory.”

Scratching at his cheek, Auber lifted his sword with a resigned expression on his face. For the first time, he was prepared to face us head-on in battle.

“North Emperor, Auber Corbett,” he called out in a steady, formal tone of voice.

Eris drew her sword and raised it high above her head. And Ghislaine brought her hand to her sheathed blade, ready to draw and strike in a single motion.

“Sword King, Eris Greyrat.”

“Sword King, Ghislaine Dedoldia.”

Hmm. Should I be giving my name too?

As I hesitated, Darius suddenly jumped up and pointed at Eris. “That red hair...you’re a Boreas, aren’t you?! You’re a Boreas Greyrat, girl!”

Eris grimaced in open disgust at the man’s sudden interest. “Not anymore, I’m not.”

“I... I’ve been an *ally* to the Boreas family! A true friend!” Darius shouted, sending spittle flying, like he hadn’t even heard Eris’ reply. “I supported them financially after the calamity in Fittoa!”

Now that he mentioned it...he *was* the guy who’d funded the Fittoa Search and Rescue Squad, right? I seemed to remember he had some impure motives for doing so, but it was hard for me to dismiss his point entirely. Regardless of his reasons, that money had helped a lot of desperate people.

“That’s got nothing to do with me!”

That’s our Eris. Couldn’t care less!

“I... I helped James, as well!”

James... meaning the current head of the Boreas family, and Eris’ uncle.

“I helped him take control of the family! I protected and rebuilt House Boreas, when the other nobles would have crushed it!”

Hmm. That part, it’s much harder to give a damn about.

“It’s because of *me* that Fittoa is being reborn at this very moment!”

What? Let’s not go telling any lies, now. “Actually, we got a look at the Fittoa Region on our way to the capital. It sure doesn’t look like the reconstruction’s moving very fast.”

“You know nothing of these matters, boy!” said Darius furiously. “If the Boreas family had been crushed completely, the other great lords would be cutting the region up for sale by now! The whole area would be a weed-choked wasteland!”

That actually sounded kind of plausible. Things were definitely not developing quickly in Fittoa. But maybe all the alternatives would have turned out worse? Maybe?

“You could have saved old man Sauros too, if you were trying to help...”

The words slipped out of my mouth in a mutter, but Darius heard them anyway—and his face contorted with anger.

“Sauros?! Don’t be ridiculous! The man had all the prudence of a wild boar! He wanted to use the *entire fortune* of House Boreas on rebuilding Fittoa, without a thought for the consequences!”

Definitely a bold, brave decision...but it did sound foolish under the circumstances. If the Boreas family went under, the whole region would end up falling prey to the other nobles anyway.

“James begged me to put a stop to that foolishness, and I did exactly that. I goaded Pilemon into action! I cornered that blundering old fool and had him executed! I put James in control! I’m the *only* reason the Boreas family and the Fittoa Region still exists! So please, have mercy! Let me go free—that’s all I ask!”

Ah... so that’s how it really happened, huh? Makes sense. Sorry, but I think you’re out of luck. If you’re the one who egged Pilemon on and arranged Sauros’ execution—

“So that makes you the murderer of my grandfather, right?” said Eris.

“I see. That clears things up,” said Ghislaine, nodding. Then she bared her teeth and grasped her sword tightly. “I’m going to kill you now.”

“Eee!”

As Darius shrieked and stumbled backward, Auber sighed wearily. “It seems our negotiations have broken down.”

With that, the final round began.

“Huff... puff...”

From the look of things, Darius had finally come to terms with reality.

He dropped into the closest chair, he stared at the ground and took a number of long, deep breaths. It was hard to believe he’d been screaming at us in a frenzy only moments earlier. “Can you win this fight, Auber?”

“Difficult to say. Two Sword Kings would be challenging enough, but that magician is quite troublesome.”

Auber stood with Darius at his back, facing us with two swords in his hands. His expression was perfectly calm, but his eyes darted back and forth constantly. It almost looked like they were moving independently from each other.

“I know,” said Darius after a moment. “God told me the same thing.”

“What did he say, specifically?”

“That a magician wearing a grey robe would murder me. But perhaps his words were lies from the very start. It was God who told me to destroy the teleportation circles, in the face of all opposition...and to call you back to the palace, where we could harden our defenses. The result was this catastrophe.”

So the Man-God *had* been moving things around behind the scenes, then. It seemed Orsted was right—the guy wasn’t much of a chess player. He seemed like the type who’d really enjoy murdering entire armies in a *Dynasty Warriors* game, though.

“Handle it, Auber,” said Darius quietly. “This is what I hired you to do. Fighting multiple opponents *is* your specialty, is it not?”

“Understood... But in the event of my victory, I will require that special reward.”

“Of course. It’s yours, as promised.”

As they spoke, Auber turned his attention *fully* on the three of us. This time, he was going to face us head-on.

Eris and Ghislaine lowered their waists and leaned slightly forward, gripping their weapons tightly.

“North God Style—Crimson Ink.”

“Graaaaah!”

“Raaaaaaah!”

As Auber murmured the name of his opening technique, Eris and Ghislaine leapt to attack.

But I knew, even as they moved, what the words *Crimson Ink* meant. Orsted had told me about this one, too. At some point, Auber had managed to lay a trap on the floor—on the surface of the room’s rich red carpet. I could just make out the small red balls sitting on it.

Of course, it was too late to do anything about them.

“Gah!”

“Hnh?!”

There was a loud *bang* from the floor at Eris and Ghislaine’s feet, like the sound of a balloon popping. Thick, sticky liquid splattered in all directions, gluing the soles of their shoes to the carpet.

Those little red balls, the creation of a master apothecary, contained a powerful instant adhesive. The process of making them was complex, so I couldn’t remember all the details... but the bottom line was that any strong shock would cause them to explode and spray their contents in the vicinity. The adhesive they contained was *monstrously* strong. Strong enough to stop Eris and Ghislaine in their tracks.

“Flash Flood!”

I quickly responded with a spell directed at their feet, which washed the sticky mess away. Auber's glue was vulnerable to water. When it came in contact with moisture, it had lost all its adhesive power instantly.

However, Eris and Ghislaine had already been thrown off balance. They'd lost the speed and steadiness they needed for their strongest techniques. But their strength kept them from pitching forward, and they tried to follow through regardless.

It was too late.

Auber was already in motion. He was already *passing in between them*.

Ghislaine's blade came to a halt, as did Eris'. They were both masters of the aggressive Sword God Style, but even they weren't about to use the Sword of Light on a target with an ally right behind him. It would mean killing both.

Auber wasn't going for Eris, and he wasn't going for Ghislaine.

"You're first, Rudeus Greyrat."

He was after me.

Auber swings both his swords down at me.

"Earth Shield!"

But I knew when and where his attack was coming. Thanks to all my sparring sessions with Eris, I could see it clearly with my Eye of Foresight.

I thrust out my left hand, blocking the trajectory of one sword with what was left of my gauntlet. With my right arm, I moved to block the other sword with a shield I'd summoned out of thin air.

"North God Style—Nebulous Cross!"

Auber's hands are suddenly a blur.

Releasing both swords in mid-air, the North Emperor ducked low to the ground and reached for another blade at his waist.

I saw all of this in advance. The Eye of Foresight showed his movements to me just fine. But that Earth Shield was already on my right forearm, covering it like a buckler. To deflect Auber's strike, I'd made it hard, and dense—and heavy. I couldn't move it fast enough to defend against this new attack.

My left hand had already met Auber's first sword head-on. My heavy, magically enhanced gauntlet had lost its fingers earlier, but it had taken the blow. It was still firmly clutching at the blade.

Auber was going to draw and strike in one smooth motion as he pitched forward. There was no way to defend myself. Not in time. I had no choice but to take the hit.

Springing into the air from half-bent knees, I took Auber's strike to my left leg.

Something hot swept through my shin. And when I landed, the leg crumpled under me.

Falling to my right knee, I looked down at the injury. Auber had cut right through my shin. The rest of my leg was dangling by a thin layer of skin and sinew.

It took a second for the pain to hit me.

“Eeaagh!”

I ground my teeth and endured the agony as best I could. From the corner of my eye, I could see Eris already in motion. Ghislaine had spun around as well.

I'd survived. Now the three of us could surround Auber. He had no place to run.

“...?”

But then I noticed something—some slight movement in the background of the room. What now? Did Auber have some other ninja trick up his sleeve?

No. There was someone else moving on the far side of the room. It was Darius, and... he had his right hand pointed our way.

"Let the vast and blessed flame converge at thy command—"

Eris and Ghislaine had noticed as well. Their responses were very different, however. Eris spun around and headed straight for Darius, while Ghislaine placed herself between him and me and faced Auber.

"Fireball!"

A flaming projectile shot from Darius' hand, its speed and size sufficient to kill.

"Hmph... Guh!"

With a swift swing of her sword, Eris cut the fireball in half in midair. But as she did so, a small kunai-like dagger came flying from across the room to hit her in the flank.

I swung my attention back to Auber. Still in the low stance from which he'd thrown the kunai, he was just about to block a fierce strike from Ghislaine. He couldn't stop it *fully*. Ghislaine's sword sliced right through Auber's and slashed into his shoulder. But the cut was too shallow—she hadn't cut his arm off entirely.

"Hnh!"

"Graah!"

Auber leapt backward with an acrobatic somersault. Eris was waiting for him where he landed; but the dagger in her side seemed to be slowing her down, and Auber warded off her strike without difficulty.

"..."

Shit. He's going to take his distance.

I wasn't sure exactly why, but my gut told me it would be a major problem for us if Auber slipped out of melee range.

But *why* was it a problem? He had all sorts of bizarre techniques he might try... No, that wasn't it. My leg was hurt, and Eris might not be able to run. If Auber managed to grab Darius right now and make a run for it, Ghislaine would be the only who could pursue him.

That's right... We've got to take Darius out, then.

Tossing my Earth Shield aside, I pointed my staff at the portly man across the room.

“Stone Cannon!”

“Hm?! Hwooooh!”

The projectile zipped along at ferocious speed, but Auber drew his sword and sliced it apart in midair.

Of course, I'd expected this to happen. That wasn't an ordinary Stone Cannon I'd fired off just now.

“Wha—”

The two halves of the projectile, deflected off-course by Auber's strike, *exploded* right next to Darius. This was a variation on my go-to spell that I'd devised while travelling the Demon Continent many years ago. I called it the Burst Stone Cannon.

“Gyaaaaaaagh!”

It looked like the fragments of the projectile had caught Darius right in the eyes. He grabbed desperately at his face and curled into a crouch.

“Hm?!”

Auber's eyes flashed back toward him for a moment.

“Aaaaah!”

In that instant, Eris sprung forward and unleashed the Sword of Light.

“Hnh?!”

Auber...blocked it. He actually *blocked* it. Turning his sword sideways, he met the blow with the very thickest part of its blade. Eris' sword cut quickly through Auber's, and finally sunk into his arm. But the cut was shallow. Her injury was probably preventing her from fully executing her technique.

"Graaaaah!"

Ghislaine was on him as well.

Auber tried to evade her strike. But the Sword of Light wasn't the kind of attack you could just *dodge*. It was the unstoppable, inescapable trump card of the Sword God Style.

There were ways to counter it, of course. You could disrupt its user's movements, throw them off balance, or position yourself somewhere they couldn't use it. By taking measures like that *in advance*, you could prevent them from cleanly executing the move.

Auber had done exactly that throughout this battle. But at the very end, he simply couldn't.

Ghislaine's flawless Sword of Light slashed into him at the shoulder and ripped its way down his flank.

"...Splendidly done."

Murmuring those final words, Auber collapsed to the floor.

He lay flat on his back, a pool of blood spreading out around him; for a few moments, he twitched and quivered. But then the light faded from his eyes, and he stopped moving at all.

He was dead.

"Aaaah, my eyes, my eyes! Auber! Help me, Auber!"

Across the room, Darius was still curled up, clutching at his face and screeching. My spell had taken the fight out of him entirely.

Ghislaine walked over and looked down at him for a moment. Then she glanced over at me and Eris.

We both nodded.

Without a word, Ghislaine swung her sword down.

The blood sprayed far enough to hit me on the cheek.

We left Darius' corpse as it was, lying right there in the room.

This was a request Ariel had made well in advance. No matter where or how we killed him, she wanted us to leave his body where it fell. It was very likely she'd be accused of his murder later on, but apparently, she believed this would actually *improve* her public image. The High Minister sure hadn't made himself too many friends and admirers.

"Phew..."

He was dead, and we'd murdered him. The man had it coming...but it still left a sour taste in my mouth. I hadn't finished him off myself, but that was hardly relevant. I'd killed Darius as much as Ghislaine had. I'd killed Auber for protecting him, and then I'd killed him as he squatted on the ground, blind and helpless.

For the first time, it felt *real*. I knew, deep down, I was a murderer.

I wasn't sure why it was different this time. Maybe it was because this one had been so up close and personal. Hard to say.

With a small sigh, I shook my head. It wasn't worth dwelling on, was it? This was the path I'd chosen, and I had to come to terms with that.

In the aftermath of the battle, we moved into the room next door, and I used one of the King-tier healing scrolls Orsted had given

me to treat my injury. It worked even better than I'd hoped; my nearly severed leg was right back to normal in an instant.

I was still feeling kind of cold, though. Probably because of all the blood I'd lost.

Eris was next up. Her face had gone pale as she watched me treat myself. But once it was over, she pulled up her own shirt quickly enough, revealing her alluringly well-defined—

“...Huh?”

The wound in her side was bright purple. That could only mean one thing. Auber's kunai had been poisoned.

I tried Elementary and Intermediate Detoxification magic on it. To no effect whatsoever.

For a moment, I just stared at the wound, cold sweat running down my back. But then I remembered something Orsted had told me. Auber favored one specific kind of poison, it wasn't lethal, and he carried the antidote with him.

Hurrying back into the other room, I rifled through Auber's clothes until I found what I was looking for. I had Eris drink some of the antidote, and then spread some on her wound as well. Just to be on the safe side, I also took some, since he'd wounded me with his sword.

After a few anxious minutes, the color of Eris' skin slowly returned to normal. I breathed a shaky sigh of relief. If that had been a more powerful poison, she might well have died.

Thank God. That was way too close...

As I continued working on her injury, Eris murmured “Nice job dodging Nebulous Cross, by the way.”

I wanted to say I hadn't exactly *dodged* it. But I'd managed to avoid a fatal blow, so maybe that counted. “I only pulled that off

because of all my sparring sessions with you, Eris. I've seen even faster slashes, so I managed to react in time."

"You know, I never even dodged that one myself..."

There was a hint of sadness on Eris' face as she said that. Auber had been one of her instructors at the Sword Sanctum. The memories of those days were probably flashing through her mind.

But a moment later, she shook her head. "Well, whatever."

Now that's a girl who puts the past behind her quickly. I'm kind of envious.

Anyway. The bottom line was that Eris, Ghislaine, and I had all survived. We'd won the battle we were here to fight.

"All right then," I said, rising to my feet. "Shall we head back?"

"Sure."

"Let's."

Now, all that remained was our triumphant return.

When the three of us walked back into the hall where the party had been held, we found a surprise waiting for us. But not the fun kind.

"...Huh?"

Luke had a sword held to Ariel's neck, while Sylphie furiously glared at him with her rod in her hand, and Pilemon knelt on the floor.

What the hell is going on here?

As we stood in the doorway, stunned, Luke's gaze flashed over at me. And then he spoke. His words weren't directed at me, though; he was speaking to Sylphie.

"If you want to save Princess Ariel, kill Rudeus here and now."

In reply, Sylphie—

Chapter 11: The Madness of Luke

SHORTLY BEFORE Rudeus' return to the hall...

Things had finally calmed down somewhat.

Most of those remaining in the party hall were the high nobles of Asura considered particularly powerful and influential. They were members of venerable houses that had served the kingdom for many generations—Greyrat, Bluwolf, Purplehorse, Whitespider, Silvertoad, and the like. Their need to see the *conclusion* to today's events had kept them here, even as the others had fled following Orsted's sudden disappearance.

Of course, the party hadn't resumed. But no one had forgotten what had taken place before its violent end. Darius had been humbled, and Perugius had walked into this hall. These two events had left a strong impression on the nobles that Ariel *would* be queen.

Many of them had been perturbed and confused by Orsted's sudden appearance, naturally. But given that Ariel had remained calm, they felt obliged to do the same.

Underneath their composed exteriors, however, the nobles were terrified. When that horrifying man burst into this room, he had effectively saved Ariel's life. He'd murdered Reida and left as suddenly as he came, without even bothering to state his name. To the nobles, the simplest explanation was that this man was one of Perugius' servants. Their hair and eyes were very similar, their faces bore a certain resemblance, and Perugius' powerful aura of authority all pointed them to this conclusion.

Perugius had a man at his command who could *kill a Water God in a single blow*.

And who had Perugius thrown his support behind? They'd learned that only minutes earlier.

Anyone who opposed Ariel might find themselves the next target of that monster. This thought, as much as anything else, led them to submit themselves to her. They didn't ask any unnecessary questions about the man's identity. They'd accepted their new master's reality as their own.

Ariel had returned to Asura as a ruthless killer. Darius might have escaped this room, but he was surely dead by now. The princess had every intention of murdering anyone who stood in her way.

Nearly everyone in the room, including even First Prince Grabel, now believed this. It was a testament to the power of Orsted's curse.

But there was one exception.

There was one man in the room who knew Ariel better than anyone in the world. One man who'd heard about Orsted from the Man-God. One man who still viewed Rudeus with suspicion, although Ariel's arguments had silenced him.

His name was Luke Notos Greyrat.

And in this moment, Luke was asking himself a question: should he truly just obey the will of that horrific, evil man, and his servant Rudeus?

Luke's heart sang with uncertainty and alarm. He couldn't shake the feeling that it was *wrong* to join forces with Orsted, regardless of the outcome. Even Darius seemed less cruel, less loathsome.

The Man-God had visited Luke in his dreams, glowing with holy radiance. With kind, gentle, and thoughtful words, he had offered Luke guidance for the road ahead—explaining how to help Ariel take

the throne, and warning that Rudeus had been seduced by the words of a vicious enemy.

But Ariel insisted that this god was evil. She insisted that he was deceiving Luke, and trying to destroy them all.

And sure, many of the Man-God's claims had ultimately turned out to be lies. No...not quite lies, exactly. His words had been vague and ambiguous in a way that led Luke to draw the wrong conclusions. Perhaps he shared the blame for jumping to conclusions.

In any case, Luke was Princess Ariel's loyal knight. He was inclined to take her word over that of an unfamiliar so-called god with unclear motives. Even if he couldn't manage to believe the same things she did, he was prepared to respect her judgment, and follow her to the bitter end.

But now, at this last stage of the game, his feelings on the matter had shifted sharply. Seeing Orsted with his own two eyes had changed *everything*.

Luke considered himself a skilled evaluator of women. Conversely, he wasn't much good at sizing up the qualities of a man. This was a weakness he was conscious of.

Even so, he *knew* beyond a shadow of a doubt that Orsted was evil.

There wasn't the slightest chance that man would work with anyone to accomplish something meaningful. He was a villain to the core, a dark god who led men to their ruin. Ariel was simply wrong about him. Most likely, Rudeus had been enthralled by him as well.

But even if that was the case... what was Luke to do? What action should he take, now that he was sure the princess was following a path he viewed as wrong?

He could express his opinion, yes. But what would that accomplish? Orsted had already taken action. He had *already played*

his part. Darius and Grabel were all but dead, and Ariel had essentially secured the throne. At this point, perhaps it was simply too late.

Luke was no master with magic or the sword. What could he accomplish now, all on his own? The answer was *nothing*. He felt it in his bones.

I'm truly powerless...

But just as he was beginning to give up entirely, there was movement in the corner of his eye. One of the nobles was approaching Ariel at a trot.

Dropping to his knees before the princess, he bowed so low that his forehead touched the ground.

“Princess Ariel!”

It was Pilemon Notos Greyrat, Luke’s own father.

With a simpering smile plastered on his face, he addressed her in a voice loud enough that everyone in the hall could hear.

“Congratulations, Your Highness. To think this day has finally come, after all my years of waiting!”

His voice rang with happiness, and he raised his head to look up at the princess.

“I had feigned loyalty to Grabel’s cause so that I could undermine them when the time was right, but it seems such scheming on my part was never even necessary. You’ve grown into a *most* formidable figure in your years abroad, it would seem!”

A number of nobles grimaced in distaste at the man’s blatant opportunism. They knew that Pilemon had personally sent assassins after Ariel following her return. They watched him with cold scorn in their eyes, marveling at how smoothly the lies slid from his lips.

“Lord Pilemon...”

"It's quite all right, Your Highness, I know what you're thinking. With few allies, I was obliged to behave in manner that some might harshly criticize. But I assure you, everything I did was for your sake! Now that the danger is past, everything can be exactly as it was before. I'll provide you with my staunch—"

Ariel didn't allow him to continue any further.

"Pilemon Notos Greyrat!" she shouted, her voice loud enough to overwhelm his own. "You had your family to consider! You had your safety to consider! Your betrayal was understandable, perhaps, given the weakness of my position!"

Pilemon stared up at Ariel with his eyes wide. This was the first time she had ever shouted at him this way.

"But once you have betrayed your ally, have the *dignity* to stay their foe until the end! In your hour of defeat, you slink back to your former master? Have you no shame?!"

"Ah... uh..."

His eyes rolling frantically, Pilemon took a moment to squeak out a reply.

"My... my deepest... apologies..."

Some among the nobles couldn't quite stifle their laughter at this pathetic display. A crimson blush spread across his face as Pilemon hung his head in disgrace.

But Ariel wasn't finished venting her anger just yet.

"A part of me viewed your changing sides as justifiable, since you sought to ensure the survival of your house. As long as you yielded your role to Luke and retired quietly to your lands, I had no intention of punishing you further! But now you fawn at the feet of the woman you betrayed?! You are contemptible beyond words, sir! It's clear that your continued existence will be nothing but a burden on this kingdom!"

At those words, Pilemon's face went white.

"Let *death* be your apology!"

It was at this moment that Luke realized something: *Ah. It's all another farce, isn't it?* Ariel had probably expected this to happen all along. Perhaps there was a *chance* her words were true, and she hadn't intended to execute Pilemon. Her promise with Ghislaine was hardly binding. She could have talked the woman into sparing his life, and perhaps she'd meant to do so.

For many years, Pilemon had been Ariel's greatest ally. Right now, he was cringing at her feet and begging for her mercy, but until their flight to Ranoa, this man had been the singular leading figure of her faction. His maneuvering had been less than skilled at times, but he had still helped Ariel in countless ways. It was Pilemon who'd arranged for her escape to the Northern Territories. And it was Pilemon who'd sent her north with numerous attendants, who helped her survive that perilous journey.

In a sense, she owed this man her life. Ariel hadn't forgotten that. But if she were to simply forgive him after his open betrayal, the world would see it as a sign of weakness. And that would compromise her ability to govern Asura.

She might have tolerated allowing him to sneak away in disgrace, but now that things had come this far, her only option was to take his head.

"Luke! Lend me your sword! I'll give him the honor of doing this myself!"

Pilemon turned toward his son with a look of sheer terror on his face. His eyes were pleading silently for Luke to say *something* on his behalf.

And as he met his father's gaze, Luke hesitated.

Luke

I KNEW MY FATHER was a coward. But I also knew how understandable that was.

While he became head of our family at a young age, he was never truly suited for the role. I was his own son, and even I could see what a clumsy, awkward, and anxious leader he was. Whenever his decisions as the liege lord of our region ended poorly, he was compared unfavorably to his stern and firm-willed father. Even his own retainers whispered behind his back that his brother Paul would have made a better lord. I saw it happen many times in my years living at our home.

My father had struggled and suffered, all to no avail. It was no wonder he'd grown bitter and lost what courage he possessed.

Now he was going to be executed right before my eyes. His own actions were ultimately to blame, but Ariel's promise to the Sword King Ghislaine likely had something to do with it as well.

It would be a lie to claim that I'd never considered the possibility my father had played a part in Sauros Boreas Greyrat's death. They had detested each other, after all. Sauros had been very close to my grandfather, the former head of the Notos family. The two of them were almost like brothers, in fact. On the other hand, he took a disliking to my father from the very beginning. At their first meeting, he'd bellowed "You're a scrawny little runt, aren't you?" in my father's face; and that was only the beginning of his insults and criticism. Sauros goaded him at every opportunity even after my father took over the Notos family.

The Displacement Incident had left Sauros terribly vulnerable. I could believe that my father would have seized that opportunity to take his revenge. In fact, it was difficult to imagine him passing up

the chance, though the Man-God's lies had convinced me otherwise for a time.

I studied the face of my father in silence.

I hadn't seen him in eight years. The man looked much older, and much smaller, than he did in my memories. I found myself wishing I could talk to him, without any of the lies or bluster.

When I was a child, we'd spoken of many things. He had kept the more important matters from me, but when I went to him with questions, he always indulged my curiosity. My father didn't know everything, of course. He would often give me answers that were simply incorrect. Still, he always had something to say to me. At times he would tell me to think it through myself, but even then, he was giving me the best guidance he could.

In hindsight, I felt that he doted on me more than my older brother. Perhaps he felt a certain connection to me, as a fellow second son. That was my father in a nutshell: an awkward man who made odd choices in the clumsiest of ways.

But for all his shortcomings, he contributed greatly Princess Ariel's cause for many years. Before our flight from Asura, he'd struggled against countless enemies on her behalf, trying to position her for the throne.

His motives were always self-interested, true. But as the head of our family, he had an obligation to protect it. Who could truly blame him for joining another faction in our absence, when all seemed lost?

He'd sent his men to lead the first attack against us. But again—he'd surely done so to protect House Notos. He must have been desperate to earn the trust of his new allies in Grabel's faction.

"Your Highness, I have a request."

"What is it, Luke?"

"Will you find it in your heart to forgive my father?"

Ariel turned to face me. There was a coldness in her eyes that I'd seen a great deal of in recent days... particularly after we learned of my father's betrayal.

"...I can't do that."

"Because of Ghislaine?"

"No. Because I can't overlook his betrayal."

Of course she couldn't. My father had openly turned against her, sending his personal troops in an attempt to take her head. No matter how friendly they'd once been, to forgive this would be harmful to her reputation.

I knew this all too well myself. Pilemon Notos Greyrat was doomed, and nothing could change that now. Perhaps that evil god had played some part in arranging this. Perhaps Rudeus and Princess Ariel were *both* being deceived. It didn't change the fact that my father had betrayed us, or that he'd shamelessly attempted to undo that betrayal.

And yet...

I didn't want to see this happen.

I drew my sword.

"...Luke?"

"Forgive me!"

"Huh?!"

I didn't know why I was doing this myself. But before I knew it, I'd pulled Princess Ariel into my arms...and pressed the side of my blade to her neck.

"Luke?! What are you doing?!"

Sylphie reacted immediately. She glared at me with murder in her eyes. Rudeus might hardly have recognized her—she never let him see this kind of fury on her face.

In her hand, she held the kind of rod used by novice mages. It was essentially a miniature staff, best suited to practicing the most basic of magic. But in her hands, it could fire off spells as powerful as those of Royal Magician captains.

Right now, it was pointed straight at me.

“Can’t you see how *bizarre* all this is, Sylphie?”

“Have you lost your mind?! Get that sword away from her!”

It was a reasonable question—*had* I gone mad? I wasn’t even sure what I was trying to accomplish with this stunt, in all honesty.

The gazes of the high nobles in the hall were fixed on me. Their faces were confused and uncertain.

...Perhaps I had doomed myself as well. But so be it.

“Tell me, Sylphie—do you really trust that man?”

“What man?! Are you talking about Orsted?! What does he have to do with anything?! ”

“Just answer the question!” I shouted fiercely.

Her rod still trained on me, Sylphie paused for an instant, then replied in a low tone of voice. “I don’t trust him in the slightest.”

“Then why do you obey Rudeus’ every order without question? Perhaps he did it for his family, but he’s sworn allegiance to that monster!”

“Why? Because I trust *Rudy*, that’s why!”

How does that make any sense?! “Rudeus is acting on Orsted’s behalf, as his direct subordinate. Haven’t you noticed any difference in his behavior lately? Are you positive Orsted isn’t deceiving him somehow?”

It wasn’t that I harbored any real hope of winning Sylphie over to my side. But since her marriage to Rudeus, I felt as if she’d

stopped making many of her own decisions. Instead of voicing her opinion, she left matters to her husband, or did exactly as he asked.

Ironically, I was the one who taught her to behave that way. I'd told her that a wife should listen quietly to her husband if she wanted to remain in his good graces. My own mother had been a vocal woman, and my father had never truly loved her. Their marriage ended in separation.

"Are you even thinking for yourself, Sylphie? Rudeus can make mistakes, just like anyone else!"

"You think I don't know that?! I think about it constantly!" Sylphie shouted indignantly. "But Rudy's doing what he thinks is best for us, okay? He swallows his pride and submits to us! He does everything he can, no matter how humiliating it feels! What am I supposed to do, argue with him and make things even harder? At least this way, I can take *some* of the burden off his shoulders!"

Sylphie's answer was clear and firm. In her thoughts, Rudeus came first—before even herself. It felt as if she'd changed a great deal in these last few years. But perhaps I simply hadn't known the girl as well as I thought I did.

"And what if your blind loyalty puts Princess Ariel in danger?!"

As I spoke these words, I pressed my sword to the neck of my sworn master. I was using the side of its blade. This wouldn't prevent me from being executed as a traitor, naturally, but I couldn't very well risk cutting Princess Ariel. It was simply wrong to mar a woman's skin with scars.

"*You're* the one with the sword against her neck!"

An excellent point, I must admit...

Just then, the door to the hall swung open and Rudeus stepped into the room.

His eyes found me and went wide with shock.

"Listen, Sylphie," I said. "By accepting everything Rudeus says, you're making yourself a pawn of that horrifying creature Orsted."

"...Fine. So what?"

"Consider what that might *mean*, in a situation like this one."

I looked over at Rudeus. He was scanning the room, perhaps trying to make sense of what was going on here. His gaze paused at a certain point, then he looked away with a disappointed expression.

Glancing in that direction, I realized he'd been looking at Perugius. Despite the drama unfolding before him, the man was sitting casually in his chair, looking utterly unconcerned. There was a small, amused smile on his lips.

"If you want to save Princess Ariel, kill Rudeus here and now," I said.

Sylphie's eyes went wide.

"What would your answer be, if I made such a demand?"

She didn't turn around, although she clearly knew that Rudeus was standing behind her now.

"You could be *forced* to choose between the two. And what would you do then?"

I knew it was an ugly, unfair question. I wasn't even sure why I was asking it. Was this truly what I'd wanted to say?

"I'd choose Rudy."

Sylphie didn't need much time to think about it. Her reply was nearly instantaneous.

"I hate to say that in front of Princess Ariel. But if Rudy wasn't the most important person in the world to me, I never would have married him in the first place. I never would have had a child with him."

It made me slightly sad to hear those words. And I imagine the Princess felt the same.

Rudeus brought both hands to his mouth, but failed to completely cover his smug grin. The man could be *truly* obnoxious at times.

"I'll stick by Rudy no matter what," said Sylphie. "I don't know how it will turn out in the end. For all I know, Orsted might decide he doesn't need us anymore... but no matter how ugly things get, I'm going to be there helping Rudy. I mean, that's what I signed up for, right?"

Those words hit me like an arrow to the chest.

She was right. I felt it in the pit of my stomach. I'd found one of the answers I was struggling for.

"...Hah."

I let out a small sigh. What was I doing here? What was I *thinking*?

My role was to aid Princess Ariel—even if she stumbled, even when she chose poorly, and even if her cause looked lost. I wanted to be the one man who would always be there for her, regardless of the circumstances. That was what I'd *signed up for*, as her knight.

What did it matter if Orsted was an evil god? True, I would rather have obeyed the Man-God than that creature. But would I follow the Man-God over *Ariel*?

The question wasn't even worth considering. It was my duty to respect her decisions, obey her commands, and risk my life to protect her if she chose poorly. It never had to be more complicated than that.

My own words had come back to hit me in the face.

"Now then, Luke."

I suppose Princess Ariel had heard my faint sigh. She chose this moment to break her silence.

"Now that Sylphie has chosen Rudeus, will you be cutting off my head?"

"Huh?"

"If so, I'd like a little time to speak with my brother first. Perhaps he'll allow Sylphie and the others safe passage outside of Asura. Do you mind?"

Her voice seemed...strangely calm.

"You're not going to ask why I'm doing this?"

"No."

That made me sad. I could hardly defend myself, now that things had gone this far... but it seemed the princess truly believed I had betrayed her. I had been by her side since we were children, supporting her in every way I could. I'd put her interests and needs before my own. And she still believed I was *capable* of turning on her, at the very end of our long journey.

Or so I thought, until I heard the words that followed.

"There's only one thing I *do* want to say to you, Luke."

"Hm...?"

"I am your princess."

I nearly broke down in tears. Those words were reward enough for me. Even after what I'd done, Princess Ariel still saw me as her knight. She'd never believed I could betray her. She was confident in my loyalty—even now, with the blade of my sword pressed against her neck.

I tossed my sword aside. It clattered against the floor, and the tension in the air was finally broken. I releasing Princess Ariel from my arms, stepped back and kneeled before her. When I looked up, I saw that she was staring at me with that same, familiar coldness in her eyes.

"Tell me, Luke. What are *you*?"

“I am...your knight.”

The princess smiled kindly at those words.

I studied her face for just a moment, then leaned forward and held my hair aside to expose my neck.

“I’m ready, Your Highness. Give me the proper punishment for my treachery.”

I didn’t *want* to die. There was still a great deal left for me to do.

But so be it. I could accept this.

“...”

Princess Ariel bent down to take my sword, lifted it awkwardly with one hand—and smacked my head with the side of its blade. A dull shock of pain radiated across my skull.

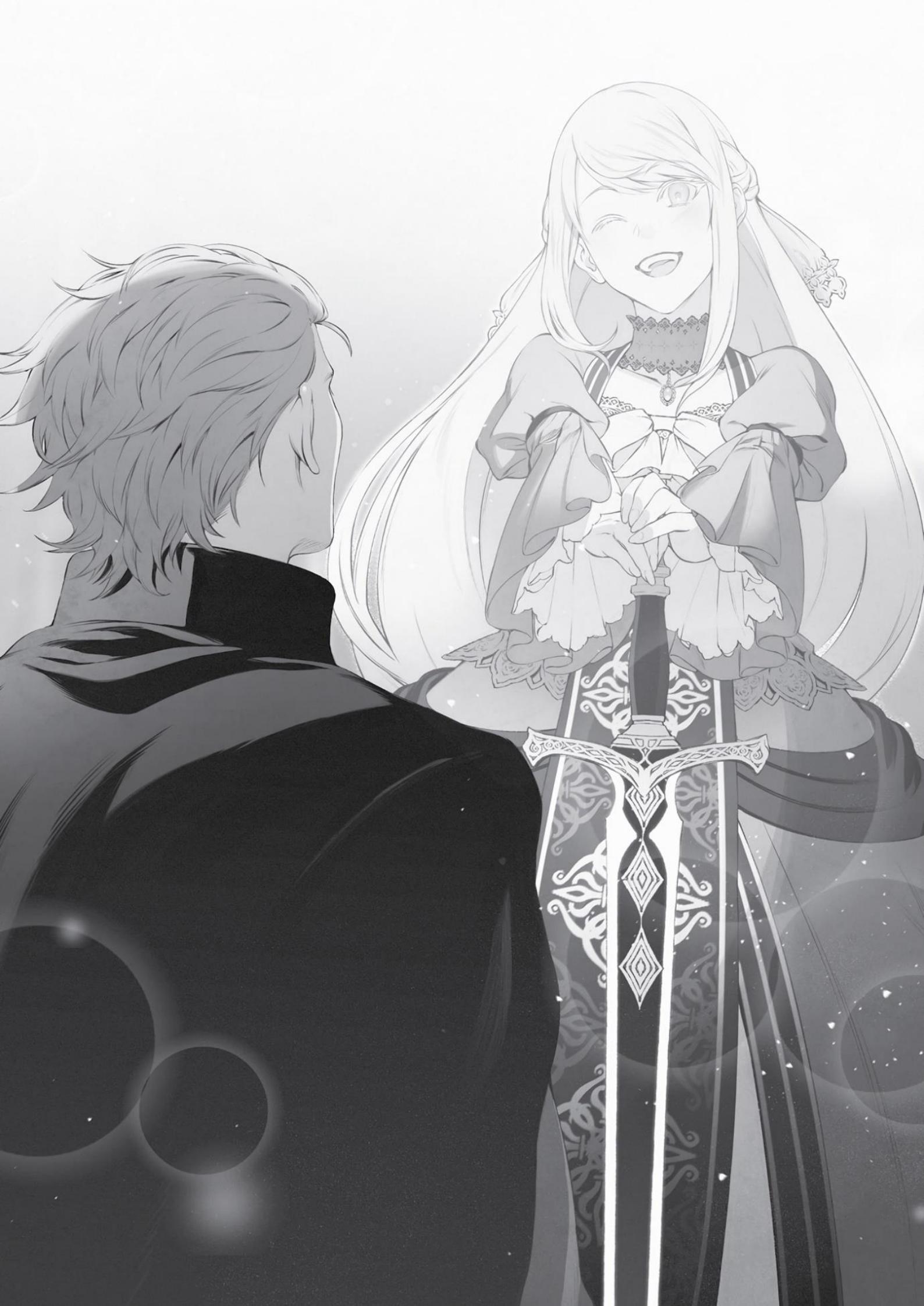
“It seems your legendary lust for women drove you to a fit of madness, Luke. I can’t imagine any other reason you would have grabbed a princess in your arms and molested her in such a manner.”

“...?”

“Ordinarily, such a crime would warrant severe punishment. But I’ll let you off the hook this time, as I happened to be in the mood for a bit of groping.”

I looked up at Princess Ariel. She met my gaze with a playful smile and a wink. How long had it been since I’d seen *this* expression on her face? These days, her smiles were mostly forced. But when we were children, she’d often grinned at me like this.

“Haha!”



It seemed I'd been forgiven. My words and deeds should, by all rights, have been construed as a betrayal. But she wasn't even going to punish me for them.

"Now then..."

Pausing to draw a breath, Princess Ariel turned to my pale-faced father. As soon as her gaze settled on him, he prostrated himself on the ground before her.

"What *shall* we do with you?"

The matter of his punishment remained unsettled. Now that she'd forgiven my betrayal, the mood of the room had shifted. It almost felt as if she *had* to find some way to pardon him.

But my father's misdeeds were grave. He'd joined forces with our enemies and tried to have the princess murdered. She couldn't simply invent some convenient story to explain this away, as she'd done for me.

We needed to find some justification. Some reason for a pardon.

As I was trying to think of something, Rudeus stepped forward to speak.

"When we cornered him, Darius revealed he was the one who'd arranged for Sauros' death. Lord Pilemon was just a pawn in his game, from the sound of things."

"...And what became of Darius?" asked the princess.

"He's de... We killed him."

"I see. In that case, I think we might as well assign him all the blame."

As she spoke those words, Princess Ariel turned her gaze to someone behind me. I turned and I found that Ghislaine and Eris had slipped around me at some point. They might have cut me down from behind if I'd kept my hold on Princess Ariel for much longer.

"Ghislaine, can you accept that?" said Princess Ariel.

"Well..."

Ghislaine looked distinctly displeased at the suggestion. Perhaps she was determined to cut my father down regardless. But before she could raise an objection, Eris reached out and yanked her tail. With a jerk of surprise, Ghislaine looked over at her pupil.

Eris folded her arms and stuck her chin into the air. "Ghislaine! We got revenge for Grandfather Sauros already, okay? Don't be greedy!"

"...If you say so, Lady Eris."

At those words, Princess Ariel turned back to my father with a satisfied expression on her face. "There you have it, Lord Pilemon. I'll issue my judgment to you at a later date."

"Y-Yes, Your Highness!"

My father threw himself to the ground once again, groveling in gratitude. He wouldn't get off without *any* punishment, of course. But it seemed his life had been spared.

"I'm... I'm sorry, Luke..."

The words were barely audible, but I was close enough to hear them clearly. And a wave of relief washed over me.

I looked around the room. Rudeus was speaking quietly to Sylphie, who had her arms around him, and stroking her head. She lowered her gaze bashfully, but looked rather pleased. Eris and Ghislaine were discussing something so loudly I could hear the conversation clearly. Eris was proudly explaining that you had to *read the room* sometimes. From the sound of things, it was a phrase Rudeus had taught her.

Perugius was the same as ever. Still planted in his seat, he was looking over this way with a highly entertained expression. I couldn't

begin to guess what the famous Armored Dragon King found so amusing, in all honesty.

My father was still groveling on the floor. He still looked very small, but a hint of color was slowly returning to his face.

The novice knight Isolde was weeping quietly as she cradled the body of the Water God in her arms. She didn't seem inclined to head in our direction.

It seemed that Darius was dead. Prince Grabel, who had lost his greatest ally, slumped in his chair, looking exhausted. There was a small crowd of nobles hovering around him, even now... but it was hard to imagine him trying much of anything.

The nobles of Princess Ariel's faction were looking on with utter bewilderment on their faces. Triss was among them, standing next to her parents.

We had no enemies left to fight.

The battle for Asura was over.

Chapter 12:

Ten Days in the Capital and the Truth About Orsted

TEN DAYS HAD PASSED since our battle in the palace.

We'd defeated the Water God Reida and Auber, killed Darius, and welcomed Perugius to Asura, overwhelming Prince Grabel and his faction.

In the end, Ariel opted to strip Pilemon of his role as the head of the Notos Greyrats and confined him to their domain. Luke would be assuming the leadership of the family, with his elder brother acting as his assistant. Luke's brother had excellent social skills and seemed to be something of a budding politician, so I got the feeling he would end up handling the day-to-day operations of the family.

At first, Ghislaine continued to view Pilemon and his son with undisguised hostility. But her attitude softened after Luke's brother barraged Eris with praise and asked if she had any interest in marriage. Ghislaine had listened to all this with the proud expression of a dog hearing her master complimented. Incidentally, she'd accepted an offer to continue serving as Princess Ariel's bodyguard. This would probably be a permanent post.

I couldn't speak for Ghislaine, Luke, or anyone else involved, but it felt like things had been settled reasonably well.

Anyway... what had I done over the last ten days?

First of all, I had a meeting with Orsted on day one.

After the battle was over, we'd returned to Ariel's residence in high spirits, flush with our victory. The Princess was understandably tired and went to sleep immediately.

As for me... I'd gotten a little worked up witnessing Sylphie choose me over Ariel, so I pulled her into my room to lavish her with love. In all honesty, I'd been kind of anxious about her feelings ever

since I read about her leaving me in that diary. Hearing her declare I was the “most important person in the world” in front of everybody got my heart all aflutter.

That said, Sylphie was pretty worn out herself, so things wrapped up after round one. She fell soundly asleep on the bed next to me while we were basking in the afterglow. I headed to the bath to rinse off and calm down a little...but then Eris barged in, bursting with residual excitement, and I was subjected to some rough loving of my own. The woman really needed to learn how to be a little *gentler* with delicate boys like me. By the time it was over, I felt like a wrung-out dishrag.

When I finally staggered out of bed the next morning, one of the maids informed me that a letter had been dropped off for me. The sender’s name wasn’t on the envelope, but it was sealed with the Dragon God’s crest. Clearly a memo from the boss. The letter was short and simple; he expressed concern about my injuries and directed me to come meet him that same day.

Our conference room that day was a graveyard.

I’d been summoned to a cemetery for servants on the very edge of the nobility’s district. It was a quiet, isolated island of grass and stones in the middle of the city. The specific meeting place was underneath the surface, in a catacomb that looked like the ideal setting for a late-night zombie dance party. A bit creepy, but no undead creature could be more terrifying than the man who was waiting for me there.

“You’re here, Rudeus Greyrat.”

“Of course! As you requested, sir.”

Orsted was sitting on a coffin with his chin in his hand. Personally, that struck me as a *bit* disrespectful to the dead, so I made a table and chairs with my Earth magic.

“Please, have a seat,” I said, setting my candle down and pulling out a chair for Orsted.

“My thanks.”

Once the boss had taken his seat, I settled down across the table from him. Now it was time to get the conference underway.

“First of all—congratulations on a job well done, Rudeus. It’s now guaranteed that Ariel will be king.”

“Is it really *guaranteed*?” I said. “The king won’t be passing away for a while, right?”

The king’s illness couldn’t be cured. He was essentially dying of old age. But it was going to take some time for that to actually happen. I knew for a fact that there were desperate, stubborn nobles who would be using that period to try pushing Grabel back into position for the throne. Ariel herself had warned us that it was too early to get careless.

There were other unpredictable factors to consider, too. The Water King Isolde had watched her beloved master die before her eyes, and the Boreas family had been *closely* tied to Darius. Both would require careful monitoring. In all honesty, I’d expected my next job assignment to involve mopping up the remaining opposition here...

“Rest assured,” said Orsted. “Between Perugius’ endorsement and the death of Darius, Ariel’s victory has become certain.”

For some reason, he seemed totally confident of this. I couldn’t understand *why*, but it was obvious he was no longer the slightest bit concerned about the outcome of this power struggle.

“You look rather puzzled, Rudeus Greyrat.”

Oh. Whoops. Was I being that obvious? “Well, Sir Orsted... in all honesty, I think it’s too early to let down our guard.”

Orsted’s gaze struck me with full force.

Come on, boss! It's not like I don't believe you or anything, really. I'm just trying to say it isn't exactly over yet, you know?

"I mean, uhm... well... sometimes things don't work out exactly as you foresee, right? It feels like we wrapped this up really quickly. Isn't there at least a chance the Man-God still has a trick or two up his sleeve?"

"No," said Orsted. "I can say that with certainty."

There wasn't much I could say to that, really. Orsted was still hiding something from me, and it seemed he didn't have any intention of changing that.

"Well, I *was* a disciple once. Guess it makes sense to keep me in the dark..."

I hadn't *meant* to mutter those words, but they slipped out anyway. I regretted them immediately. Orsted rose to his feet at once and glared at me even more intensely than usual.

"Yikes! I-I'm sorry, sir, I didn't mean it like that! It's not like I'm *complaining* about you keeping things from me, I just—"

"It's true, Rudeus Greyrat. I never completely trusted you."

I fully activated my Eye of Foresight to frantically glance around in search of an escape route. It was no good. Shadowy images of Orsted had me surrounded on all sides. If I jumped up and tried to flee, he'd cut me off in no time.

Guess I'll just prepare myself for the worst...

"In fact, I monitored you throughout this mission to see if you might betray me for the Man-God."

Oh. Well. That did make sense. I mean... the man probably could have taken out Auber, or anyone else, all by himself without me even noticing. Maybe he'd left them to me as a test of sorts.

"But after your performance in this matter," Orsted continued, "it's clear to me that you're not just talk. You are a man worthy of my trust."

A pause.

"Allow me to offer you an apology, Rudeus Greyrat. Part of what I've told you about myself is a lie."

"Really?"

Orsted scowled at my question. No, maybe that was just a thoughtful frown? Sometimes I wished the guy would take some time to practice the art of *smiling*. It would make talking to him a lot less stressful.

Then again, I had some problems in that department myself.

"Yes. Do you recall when I explained the secret art created by the first Dragon God? I told you that it enabled me to see the flow of destiny, and exempted me from the laws of this world."

"I remember." He'd described it as a power that let him see the general path of someone's future.

"Half of that explanation was a lie. I can see nothing whatsoever of what lies ahead."

...Hmm. Okay.

"So that means you really are exempt from the laws of this world, right?"

"Indeed. But let me ask you this, Rudeus Greyrat—what do you think that *means*, precisely?"

How am I supposed to know? I don't remember him dropping any hints about this. Uhm... well, what about his curse? The one that makes everyone hate him? Could that have something to do with it? Nah, I can't see how that would be connected...

"Well, you said it dramatically slows your rate of mana regeneration. But that's just a side effect, right?"

“Yes. My mana regenerates very slowly, and in exchange, I am immune to the Man-God’s meddling. Don’t you find this odd, however? Why would the first Dragon God have created an art that puts its user at such an enormous disadvantage?”

I mean, maybe that was the only way to hide him from the Man-God? The trade-off might be worth it... Wait...no, that doesn't make much sense. The Man-God can't see me when I'm wearing Orsted's bracelet, and my mana regenerates just fine.

“Allow me to explain,” Orsted continued. “This secret art was created to guarantee victory against the Man-God.”

I blinked.

“In exchange for crippling the user’s rate of mana regeneration, it allows them to redo this war from the start with their memories intact. No matter how or when they die.”

Does that mean what I think it means? Is Orsted actually—

“My starting point is in winter of the year 330 in the Armored Dragon Era. I return to a nameless forest in the Northern Regions of the Central Continent. From that moment, I have two hundred years. Unless I kill the Man-God by that deadline, I am *returned* automatically. The same thing occurs when I die at some point along the way.”

So he *was* stuck in a time loop. The possibility had occurred to me before, but I’d found it too strange to believe.

“An outlandish story, I’ll admit. But you have seen a man travel through time with your own eyes—surely you’re capable of believing this.”

“Well, yes...”

My future self had found hints about the principles of time travel in ancient Dragonfolk ruins. And I knew they’d created a reincarnation technique that sent their souls into the future. I could

easily believe they'd worked out a way to jump back in time as well...especially since I'd figured out how to do it all by myself.

"Uhm, so... Can I ask how many times you've reset so far, Sir Orsted?"

"I stopped counting at a hundred," he replied bitterly.

Two hundred years times a hundred would be... twenty thousand years? Just thinking about this is making me dizzy...

"I've traveled this loop hundreds of times by now, I suppose," Orsted said. "And in the course of those attempts, I've witnessed Ariel and Grabel's battle *many* times. I know what matters to its outcome, and I know *who* matters. I know what will lead to Ariel's triumph and her defeat. And at this stage, it's simply impossible for Grabel to turn things around. Ariel's victory is assured."

"Even with the Man-God meddling with events?"

"Even so. The Man-God does not retain his memories of our past conflicts, and is therefore unaware that I'm trapped in a time loop. But after I learned of his existence and began my war against him, he has meddled in conflicts of this kind numerous times. And in every instance, there comes a point where he *ceases* to interfere."

"And we just passed that point."

"Precisely."

Well, this did explain why Orsted always made his predictions with such confidence. He was speaking from a truly huge amount of experience.

A part of me felt like events *might* still take an unexpected turn... but when you put the same group of people in the same situation, they were probably going to act the same way every time. There had to be some minor differences in the circumstances this time around, but the odds of a complete surprise did seem very low.

"In other words, there's no cause for concern," Orsted said.
"Ariel will rule."

"Okay. I understand now."

At this point, I was willing to take Orsted at his word on that. Something did make me *slightly* anxious, though: the fact that he'd failed in his mission so many times in a row.

"Sir Orsted...can you really defeat the Man-God?"

"I can. I've already established what I need to kill him, and I know what preparations will be necessary. And this time, I have you on my side as well. We're very close now."

All right. I'll just have to believe that.

To me, it didn't make much of a difference if Orsted was seeing the future or if he was caught in a time loop. I had to trust his judgment either way.

I was going to do my part. It was the only way to keep my family safe.

On the third day after the battle, Isolde stopped by the mansion where we were staying. It was something Princess Ariel had given to us, apparently one of the smaller residences she owned, but still twice the size of my home back in Ranoa. The thing even came with servants who'd take care of it in our absence. She said we were free to use it as a villa any time we stopped by Asura.

Isolde had come over to see Eris in particular. I was wary of her at first, just in case she was here for revenge. She seemed to notice the tension on my face, but still behaved quite politely.

After introducing herself to the servants, Isolde followed Eris to the living room, where the maids brought in some tea. Our hospitality was pretty modest, but you'd never know it from how confidently Eris handled things. The girl was a natural at ordering

people around. Which made sense, given that she'd grown up in a mansion.

Living in my house was probably a little awkward for her, wasn't it? I mean, we did have Aisha, but she wasn't really a *servant*...

Isolde received our welcome graciously, but seemed doubtful about my presence in the room. After a while, she bowed to me cautiously. "It's a pleasure to meet you, sir. My name is Isolde Cluel. Eris and I trained together in the Sword Sanctum."

"Nice to meet you," I said. "I'm Rudeus Greyrat, Eris' husband."

Isolde grimaced. "Ah. So it was you..."

Well, the woman seemed to hate my guts. But I'd been expecting that, given the way she'd talked about me the first time we bumped into each other.

"Uhm... yes. I'm Rudeus."

"The man who neglected Eris for years on end, and took *two* other wives in the meantime?"

"...Right." This was starting to feel familiar. It almost felt like I was talking to Cliff. Might we have another bible-thumper on our hands?!

I mean, yeah. I figured that out the first time, too...

"I had rather assumed you were that frivolous knight Luke, you know."

"Well... I don't think I ever lied to you about my identity, did I?"

"No. I simply jumped to conclusions." Isolde paused, then offered me a slight smile. "In any case, it seems you take better care of Eris than I'd expected."

"What makes you say that?"

This sudden turn in the conversation felt a little puzzling. I wasn't sure how much I "took care" of Eris, honestly. She definitely

took good care of *me*. But I didn't remember saying anything about our relationship either way.

"The Water King Isolde is here to visit," said Isolde. "She was a student of the Water God Reida, and saw her master killed before her eyes. What if she's an enemy of the princess? What if she came here for revenge? Eris might draw her sword. I have to protect her... That's what you're thinking, isn't it? It's written all over your face."

I didn't know you could even fit that many words on my face... I felt like people had been reading my thoughts way too often lately. Maybe I really did need to make some time for those smiling practice sessions.

Ah well. It wasn't the end of the world.

"And... that makes you think I'm treating Eris well?"

"If you didn't care about her, you wouldn't be so protective," said Isolde. "She's just wife number three, after all."

Did she really have to call Eris "number three" right in front of her? It wasn't like I *ranked* my wives or anything.

"In all honesty, I assumed you'd be neglecting Eris. Perhaps demanding that she fight your battles and sleep with you, but otherwise not even speaking to her..."

Sounded more like slavery than a marriage.

Eris wasn't really that talkative in general, though. It was rare for her to start a conversation, and sometimes she just burst into my room at night to ravish me... Hm. Was I just *her* plaything, or what?

Nah, that wasn't fair. She was always willing to do stuff like training with me, at least.

"It's a bit of a relief," said Isolde. "She looks quite happy with you."

"Well... I'm glad to hear you think so."

That earned me a smile from Isolde. It was a beautiful thing to witness, honestly. She looked like the prim and proper type, but there was a hint of the alluring about her too. Men would be falling over themselves around her once she really blossomed, but I had a feeling that wouldn't happen until she got married. I could see her as the sexy wife next door, for sure...

Ouch. Eris, dear? It hurts when you stomp on my foot.

"So? Why are you here, anyway? Rudeus is mine, so you can't have him."

Hmm. Hearing me complimented usually put Eris in a good mood, but today she seemed to be stuck in her bossy brat mode.

"Believe me, I'm not interested in the slightest."

Understandable, but do you have to sound so disgusted by the idea? I'm a little hurt.

"You want a duel, then?" asked Eris.

Isolde smiled awkwardly. "No. Master Reida wanted me to carry on the Water God Style, and Princess Ariel has already agreed to support us. I'm not your enemy."

Just as originally planned, Isolde was going to complete her stint as a novice, then receive an appointment of some kind once she became a full-fledged knight. She'd probably end up as the palace sword instructor or a captain of the Royal Knights. There was even a chance she might even be granted a noble title at some point.

"Master Reida could be rather prickly, but it seems she had a number of friends and sympathizers in the royal court. I suppose the princess doesn't wish to make an enemy of all the practitioners of her style, either."

"Yeah, that makes sense."

The swordmasters of this world tended to be monstrously strong. Political clout still counted for more than combat prowess,

but it would be silly to antagonize a group of deadly fighters when you could get them on your side instead.

“And of course, we’re all quite relieved to know that our training halls won’t be shut down entirely.”

On a superficial level, Reida’s attack was an insane, unprovoked attempt to murder a princess of Asura. Even in a place like the royal court, where intrigue was constant and murders were commonplace, a *public* assassination attempt was going to lead to an investigation. You could get away with anything, as long as it happened in the shadows. If you got caught, there was going to be some trouble. Well... unless you were a seriously powerful figure like Grabel, Ariel, or Darius, who could sweep most things under the rug.

In this specific situation, Ariel didn’t want to spark a conflict with practitioners of the Water God Style, and they weren’t interested in fighting a losing battle, either. Since their interests coincided, no one would be held accountable for Reida’s crime. Everyone had agreed to put the incident behind them. That was probably difficult for Isolde, on some level.

“It’s a pity that Master Reida lost her life. But at least she died a swordmaster’s death—that’s no small accomplishment in these peaceful times. I only wish she’d told me of her intentions beforehand.”

She seemed to mean those words. I got the sense that she wasn’t so devastated about Reida’s death. It was an attitude that reminded me of the adventurers I used to travel with.

“So you’re over it?” asked Eris bluntly.

“I won’t deny that I’d *like* to avenge my master’s death...but it wasn’t you, Ghislaine, or Rudeus who killed her, so I don’t suppose I’ll ever have the chance.”

Isolde sounded just a little bitter as she spoke those words. Maybe a part of her regretted not chasing Orsted when he fled that hall.

"I don't mind dueling, if you want," said Eris.

"Please, Eris, don't even joke about that. I have an obligation to protect the training halls of my style. The last thing I need is to suffer some lifelong injury fighting a crazed hellcat like you."

"*A crazed hellcat*"...? Hmm. Rude. But accurate.

"Who cares about a bunch of musty training halls, anyway?"

"I suppose it would seem odd to a girl who fled her house and her responsibilities. But for some of us, our *obligations* are very real."

Eris fell silent, looking sullen and a little sad.

"It's only been a year since the last time we saw each other, anyway," said Isolde, her eyes flashing playfully. "Wouldn't it be more fun to wait until we've both gotten a bit stronger?"

"Oh! Yeah, you're right!"

Just like that, Eris' face lit up in excitement. She seemed to think her friend was being completely serious. Isolde, on the other hand, was regarding her with the patronizing smile of someone who'd just tossed a dog a bone. The woman clearly had some experience handling Eris.

"The only real reason I stopped by today was to see you, Eris. Since you've come all this way, why don't I show you around the city?"

"That sounds good. I was getting kind of bored just sitting around here, anyway. Let's go!"

"You're certainly welcome to come along as well, Rudeus."

I considered the matter for a moment. There was a chance the two of them might get into a fight out there. And for all I knew,

Isolde had been lying to us this entire time... What if she led Eris into a mob of Water God Style students or something? It felt safer for me to tag along.

“...Okay then. I guess I will.”

We spent the rest of that day seeing the sights with Isolde. My concerns proved unfounded, as she never led us into any ambushes, and seemed to be genuinely enjoying her time with Eris.

I guess she waited until she'd come to terms with her master's death before visiting us.

On the fifth day after the battle, Sylphie and I received an invitation to dinner from the Boreas family. Eris wasn't invited.

I headed over there half-expecting them to try poisoning us, but as it turned out, they wanted to use me as their intermediary to establish a friendlier relationship with Princess Ariel.

I'd never met the current head of the family, James, but he'd mentioned my name to Alphonse, who was still heading up the reconstruction effort in Fittoa. The old man had shared a few stories about me from the good old days, which prompted James to make the invitation. It seemed Alphonse had mentioned that I was Paul's son, and technically part of the Notos Greyrat family tree.

Cozying up to me might create friction between the Boreas family and Luke, Ariel's most trusted retainer...but I got the sense that what they *really* wanted was for me to undermine House Notos. If I demanded a noble title as a Notos Greyrat, it would inevitably cause a conflict between me and Luke. Even if I didn't come out on top, the struggle would create opportunities that the Boreas Greyrats could use to their advantage.

You'd think they would have invited Eris to remind me of my ties to their family, but I guess they were wary of her. If I could make life

miserable for the Notos, Eris could do the exact same thing to the Boreas. Basically, they wanted to forget she even existed.

I could understand the logic, but this cautious, underhanded strategy felt like proof that the Boreas family I knew and loved was gone for good. I spent the dinner nodding vaguely, and didn't promise anything.

On the eighth day, I took some time to check in on how everyone was doing.

Triss had officially returned to her former life as a noblewoman. She seemed to have assumed a role as one of Ariel's attendants, like Ellemoi and Cleane. But Ariel was quietly arranging to put her back in contact with her former bandit gang, who might prove useful down the line.

Ariel and Luke were hard at work, and probably would be for quite some time. Darius' death had caused a certain amount of chaos and confusion in the court, but they'd brought things under control. Preparations for Ariel's ascension to the throne were coming along steadily.

Perugius had already returned to his floating fortress, leaving one of his servants behind in the palace as a representative. When I sent him my condolences about the two he'd lost in battle, he explained they could be revived back at his castle. Sounded like a handy feature.

It seemed like Orsted was right—everything was moving smoothly along. It seemed like there was nothing left for me to worry about. My job here was done.

I mentioned to Princess Ariel that I was thinking about heading home soon; and the next day, she summoned me to her chambers.

On the night of the ninth day, I found myself in Ariel's bedchambers in the Silver Palace.

I didn't want anyone suspecting me of cheating on my wives, so I'd brought Sylphie along with me. The princess hadn't asked me to come alone or anything.

Her chambers were beyond luxurious, naturally. Technically all of this was part of the palace, but she had an entire house to herself here. The furniture and decorations were all magnificent; the sofa was so soft I was worried it might swallow me whole. The whole place seemed to be *twinkling* slightly, even the parts of it that weren't made of gold. This had to be the fanciest stuff you could find anywhere in this world.

Ordinarily, this room would probably have been swarming with maids, but I guess Ariel had dismissed them all for our meeting. It made the place feel kind of empty. The princess poured us drinks personally, with her expensive furnishings looming coldly all around her.

"Here you are."

"Thank you, Your Highness."

The golden cup she'd handed me was full of purple liquid. *Wine, huh? This must be the pricey stuff, too... Like, Romanée-Conti... pricey...*

"I see you brought Sylphie as well."

"Yes. I wouldn't want to be alone with a pretty woman like yourself at this hour, you know? People might talk."

"Goodness. Yes, I suppose there's no telling what could have happened, is there?"

Ariel was smiling, but Sylphie didn't look amused. She did know I was joking, right?

"Rudy really *might* have gotten you into bed, you know."

Hm. My wife seemed to think I was a beast who'd cheat on her at any opportunity. Sad, but I only had myself to blame.

Even if Sylphie didn't trust me, I still trusted her. Especially now that she'd told everyone she would choose me over Ariel. Hearing that really got my heart quivering, honestly. If I were a praying mantis, I probably would have let her eat me on the spot.

"Now then..."

After handing Sylphie her glass of wine, Ariel settled down into a seat across from us.

"Allow me to express my sincere gratitude once again, Rudeus. It's thanks to you that we've made it to this point."

"I don't think I agree, Your Highness. This was your victory, and you made it happen yourself." All those years Ariel spent making connections and gathering allies back in the Kingdom of Ranoa had finally paid off. She had a whole stable of talented, savvy loyalists at her disposal; they were already stepping in to fill the vacuum left by Darius' death, and to replace the nobles of the Grabel faction. If things kept moving along according to plan, the princess would have total control over the kingdom before too long.

"And what of the matter with Lord Perugius? Or your guidance on our journey? Or that *introduction* you arranged for me? It was you who made this possible, Rudeus. I would have fallen short without your assistance."

"Well... it's nice of you to say so."

"I owe you a great deal. Perhaps Sylphie's right—you *might* have gotten me into bed tonight if you tried."

Ariel flirtatiously batted her eyes at me for a moment. My gaze wandered downward, reaching the nape of her neck before Sylphie glared at me so hard I managed to stop myself. By the time my eyes returned to her face, the princess had gone back to her usual smile.

“I’m only joking. But in all seriousness, I truly would like to reward you somehow.”

“Reward me? I don’t think that’s necessary...” This whole thing had essentially been a work assignment for me. And she’d already given me an entire mansion we could use as a vacation home.

“Come now. Is there anything I can do for you? Given my promise to Luke, I can’t offer you territory or a noble title, but you can have anything else I’m capable of giving you.”

Well, that didn’t narrow it down much. It felt like there were lots of things I wanted, but it was hard to pin down a single request. There were plenty of things you could only find in the Kingdom of Asura. Maybe she could get me a rare grimoire or something?

Oh, wait. There is one thing I could ask for.

“Well... I’m not sure when it’s going to happen, but at some point, I intend to start selling a figurine that comes with a book. It’s a figurine of a demon, so it would help to get official permission from the royal family.”

“Ah, yes. I remember you discussing this with Lord Perugius.”

“Right. I’m guessing it might be a little difficult, though?”

The Millis Church was very prominent in the Kingdom of Asura. If they saw the royal family publicly encouraging the sale of demon figurines, it might lead to some political friction.

“Not at all,” said Ariel. “I’ll see that you have authorization, and provide you with workshops that can manufacture your product.”

“You don’t think the Millis Church will object?”

“It won’t be an issue. Problems of this sort can be solved with money.”

Ah, the power of bribery... It made sense, though. Taking the throne of Asura meant becoming the single richest person in the world.

“Okay then, I guess I’ll get in touch once we’re ready.”

“Very well. I’ll be ready and waiting.”

So we had a sponsor and a manufacturing plan. Now it just came down to how quickly Julie could perfect her skills. I seemed to remember reading in my future self’s diary that the figurines sold well when packaged with a picture book, specifically. That sounded like a smart approach. There were a lot of illiterate people out there, but they could at least look at the pictures. We’d have to find an artist if we *really* wanted to rake it in...

As I busied myself with counting unhatched chickens, Ariel straightened her back and turned to Sylphie. “Of course, I owe this victory to you as well, Sylphie.”

“Congratulations, Ariel. I’m so happy for you...”

Yesterday, Sylphie had formally quit her job as Ariel’s bodyguard. She’d been busy arranging for her replacement until the day before. But once it was actually done, she spent an entire day with her head in the clouds.

“You’re sure you don’t need my help anymore, right?”

“That’s right. I’ll be just fine. Thank you so much for all the years you spent protecting me.”

Ariel bowed her head *deeply* as she spoke those words. That wasn’t something you saw every day.

“Please, Ariel. You don’t have to bow to me.”

“I don’t want to pretend I can repay you with gifts or money, Sylphie. But I want you to understand how truly, deeply grateful I am. You’ve helped me in more ways than I could even count.”

“Come on, it’s not that big a deal. I was just helping out my friend.”

Sylphie took the princess’ hands and squeezed them gently as she spoke. They *had* been friends for an entire decade now, hadn’t they? You could really tell how much they cared about each other.



“Please do come back to see me, Sylphie. You’re welcome any time.”

“I will, I promise. And if you happen to be in Ranoa... well, I guess you wouldn’t have time to stop by our house or anything...”

“True, but I can always arrange for a party at the castle there. You’ll all be invited, naturally.”

“Ahaha. I guess we’re big, important people now, huh?”

Sylphie and Ariel talked cheerfully for a while after that. As I listened quietly, I found myself remembering the day I’d first met Sylphie. I could still see her trudging along that field all by herself, too scared to complain when the local bullies tossed mud at her. But here she was, chatting happily with a royal princess... and more importantly, a friend.

The thought made me feel all warm and fuzzy.

Finally, the tenth day came. It was time for us to leave Asura behind.

Chapter 13: Farewells and Changes

ON THE DAY we planned to depart, a visitor came to our mansion first thing in the morning.

It was Ghislaine. And she'd brought three wooden swords with her. She didn't explain the purpose of her visit, but she didn't really need to, either. Eris and I both took a wooden sword, got dressed, and headed out back.

The mansion's backyard was relatively large, but it was also full of flowerbeds, which made it feel a bit cramped. Still, we had enough space for our purposes.

Eris and I faced Ghislaine with our swords in our hands. A bleary-eyed Sylphie looked on from a chair a short distance away. The maids, who were already hard at work, were shooting puzzled glances our way as well.

"Let's begin the training session."

At these words from Ghislaine, Eris and I brought our swords to our waist and bowed.

"We're ready."

Ghislaine nodded briefly and raised her sword. We followed suit.

"All right. Practice swings first! One! Two!"

Eris and I swung our swords in time with Ghislaine's shouts and movements. In the early-morning silence, our wooden blades sliced audibly through the air.

My swings were slower and less clean than those of Eris or Ghislaine. But Ghislaine wasn't yelling criticism at me. Back in the day, she used to shout things like "Keep your arms in tight!" or "Watch the tip of your sword!" every time I practiced with her. Maybe she wasn't going to bother today.

“Rudeus! Stay focused!”

“Right!”

Apparently, I’d jumped to conclusions.

Still, she wasn’t saying anything about my stance. I guess I had that part down solid, at least. I had been practicing my swing and the basic forms on a regular basis for many years now, so I suppose I’d improved significantly.

“198! 199! 200! Stop!”

After we’d been going for a while, Ghislaine abruptly cut us off. There was sweat glistening on her forehead, and the same was true of Eris.

Two hundred wasn’t *that* many swings. But they’d used all their strength for every single one of them. It wasn’t about the numbers. Still, they weren’t breathing hard or anything. Neither was I, for that matter. The practice swings were just our warm-up exercise.

“Forms next! We’ll begin with Swift Wind!”

“Yes!”

Eris and I lifted our swords again and began to practice set motions of the Sword God forms. I didn’t hesitate; these were the fundamental movements of this style, and I knew them by heart. I’d even taught them to Norn back in Ranoa. Since my marriage to Eris, I’d also practiced with her almost every day.

“All right! Stop!”

Once we’d worked our way through all the basic forms used in training, Ghislaine called out to us again.

“Pair off!”

At these words, Eris and I turned to face each other. This was a command to begin practicing with one of your fellow students. In most cases, this involved one student repetitively attacking the other in a specific manner.

In kendo, at least, you were supposed to have the less skilled partner take the role of attacker; but we always had Eris swing at me instead. That was how we'd done it back when we were kids, and we stuck with it after our marriage. It just felt more natural that way.

“Begin!”

“Raaaah!”

As soon as Ghislaine gave the signal, Eris went on the offensive. She was sticking to the standard practice forms, so her movements weren't impossibly fast. Her sword moved *just* slow enough to allow me to respond. And she stopped her swings at the last moment when they would have struck me.

Of course, the Sword God Style didn't teach you how to do that. When we were kids, she was constantly smacking me when we practiced. But things were different now. She'd learned a lot since then.

“Alternate!”

When we switched roles, my attacks were totally ineffective. I didn't have to worry about stopping my sword; Eris took care of that for me just fine. The difference in our skill level was obvious. I could have put up a slightly better fight by relying on my Eye of Foresight, but I didn't activate it. I hadn't gained this power back when we were in Fittoa, so I wasn't going to use it. Not this time.

“All right! Stop!”

At Ghislaine's command, Eris and I lowered our swords.

Normally, the next stage would be a freeform sparring session. Putting me up against Eris without my magic or Demon Eye wouldn't make for much of a contest, of course...

To my surprise, Ghislaine turned to me and jerked her head.
“Rudeus, step aside and observe!”

As I moved out of the way, Ghislaine stepped forward into my place. I backed away another five paces and kneeled on the grass.

Facing off against her student, Ghislaine brought her sword behind her waist. "This will be the last time, Eris."

"...Right."

Nodding, Eris lifted her own sword high above her head. It was a stance she never used when practicing with me. Ghislaine would be "drawing" and attacking in a single motion, and Eris would be swinging downward with all her might. It made for quite a contrast.

The world seemed to stop moving entirely, and time itself slowed to a crawl. Cold sweat trickled down my back. I couldn't shake the feeling they were holding *real* swords in their hands.

That moment seemed to last an eternity. But then there was a small gust of wind.

This time, there was no formal signal.

A loud *smack* reverberated through the air.

They'd moved too quickly for my eyes to follow. All I got to see was the end result.

Eris and Ghislaine were standing with their swords outstretched at each other. The only real difference was that Ghislaine's blade had been broken at the base.

Eris' sword was slightly bent, but it was pressed to her master's neck.

"..."

"..."

The two of them stayed in that position for a moment, then slowly pulled their weapons back. For some reason, Eris had a little scowl on her face.

Her expression solemn, Ghislaine nodded to her student. "That concludes our training session."

"Thank you very much!" I shouted, bowing from my seated position.

When I looked up again, Eris still had her head lowered. She was biting her lip, her forehead was all crinkled up...and her cheeks were trembling.

"Well then, Lady Eris... farewell."

"Pl-Please take c-care of yourself, Master!" Eris looked up with tears swimming in her eyes, then bowed her head a second time.

Ghislaine didn't say anything else. She gave me one last meaningful look, then walked off without another word.

With that glance, she'd asked me to look after Eris for her. I felt very confident of that.

Rising to my feet, I bowed to Ghislaine one last time, bending deeply at the waist. She was the woman who had taught me the ways of the sword, and the woman who kept Eris safe for many years. I couldn't thank her enough for that. I really couldn't.

The instant Ghislaine passed out of view, Eris broke down in tears. She cried so loudly I think everyone on the block could hear her.

Later that morning, when it was time for us to leave, a large number of visitors stopped by to say their farewells to Sylphie.

Many of them were nobles from Ariel's faction who knew Sylphie as Silent Fitz. They hadn't even known she was a woman, and seemed quite surprised to learn she was married to me. That didn't

change their respectful attitude, however. One by one, they briefly expressed their gratitude and then bid her farewell. Sylphie kept a smile on her face the entire time, but I could tell she was mostly just being polite. When it was finally over, she let out a long-suffering sigh and muttered, “This sort of thing really wears me out.”

When Ariel’s two attendants showed up, though, her face lit up with genuine happiness. I didn’t know Ellemoi Bluewolf and Cleane Elrond very well myself, but they were close friends of Sylphie’s. Their goodbyes were long and tearful, and involved a lot of promising to meet again someday.

Our last visitor was Luke.

He only stopped by for fifteen minutes or so. Now that he was both Ariel’s right-hand man *and* the liege lord of an entire region, the man’s schedule was getting busier by the day. But he’d found the time to slip away and say goodbye.

“Sylphie...take care of yourself, all right?”

“Yeah. I will.”

He had a hard time looking Sylphie in the eye at first, however. I guess he was still feeling a little guilty. “I’m sorry about... the way I tested you like that, at the very end. After all these years.”

“It’s okay, Luke. I know how anxious you were. I’m still not sure what I would have done if you’d *really* tried to hurt Princess Ariel, either.”

“Right... well, thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I’m not sure what for, though!”

“Hmm. You have a point.”

They both cracked up at that.

After the laughter passed, Luke’s smile turned slightly awkward, and he took a moment to consider his next words. They turned out to be a bombshell.

"Uhhh... Look, Sylphie. If you ever decide you can't stay with Rudeus anymore, come find me."

I stiffened up like a board. Had he just proposed marriage? To my wife? While I was standing right next to her?

"What are you *talking* about?" said Sylphie. "I'm never going to leave Rudy, and it's not like I'd go marry you even if I did."

"I'm not talking about getting married. All I'm saying is...if you ever find yourself with no place to go, Elle and Clea and I will always be here for you."

Luke's voice sounded firm and sincere. That first line sure *sounded* like a romantic proposal, but maybe he really had meant it in a platonic way. Still, a few suspicious beads of sweat formed on his forehead. Had Luke been carrying a flame for Sylphie all this time? What happened to only liking busty women?

Well... maybe this was his way of warning me to treat her right, too. I did need to work on that.

"I don't think that's going to happen," said Sylphie. "But I'll definitely come visit you guys, at least."

"Of course. You're always welcome here."

"Thanks, Luke. You take care of yourself, too."

Compared to Eris and Ghislaine's farewell, this felt pretty low-key. But it wasn't like they'd never see each other again, right? I had to imagine they were going to stay in touch, at least.

"Rudeus."

For some reason, Luke now turned his attention my way. What was this about? Did he want another duel or something?

"I'm sorry I was so suspicious of you on our journey here."

Oh. Well, I wasn't expecting that. "That's all right, Luke. I know my behavior was a little shady sometimes."

It was true that Luke had been misled by the Man-God. But I'd also acted in some genuinely suspicious ways—even though I knew there was a good chance Luke might be a disciple. I had to share some of the blame for the way things played out. "Anyway, it's your job to be a little paranoid, right?"

"I'm glad you see it that way." Scratching at his cheek, Luke offered me an embarrassed smile. "My offer stands for you as well, Rudeus. If that stick of a girl ever loses her appeal for you, come pay me a visit. We've got plenty of maids with curves in the right places."

"Luke!"

Flinching at the anger in Sylphie's voice, Luke chuckled softly. "Only joking..."

And with that, he headed back to the horse he'd rode in on. The man really knew how to hop onto a pure-white steed, you had to give him that. He was born to play Prince Charming.

"Rudeus, look after Sylphie for us. Sylphie, take care."

With those final words, Luke rode away like there were damsels to be rescued.

The first time we'd met, I thought the guy was a total jerk. But if Paul had behaved himself, and we'd grown up together in the Notos family... maybe Luke and I actually could have been friends.

Sylphie and I watched him until he vanished around a corner.

We'd said all our farewells. Now it was finally time to head back home.

It had taken us a good month to get here...but fortunately, Perugius would be making our return journey a good deal briefer. At some point in the last ten days, he'd created a new teleportation circle in the royal palace. That would take us to his floating fortress,

where we could teleport to the ruins just outside Sharia. From there, it would be a half-day's journey back to our front door.

Compared to our long, eventful trip out, this was going to be a total breeze. From now on, we could use the same route to reach Asura in a single day if we wanted to.

When I explained this to Eris, I discovered that she'd expected our journey back to take over a month as well.

"What the heck?!" was her reply. "I cried like an idiot over *nothing!*" Then she punched me.

Personally, I felt like it was a good thing that she'd done her big goodbye with Ghislaine. Geographically, they might be a mere day's travel away from one another, but they'd still gone their separate ways. I guess that beautiful memory *had* been spoiled slightly, though. Eris didn't cry too often, so it was a shame to think her tears had gone to waste.

At this point, it occurred to me that Ghislaine had probably jumped to the same conclusion as her student. Those two were pretty similar in a lot of respects, weren't they? One of these days, we'd have to pop up out of nowhere and surprise her.

Of course, Perugius would probably get irritated if we started breezing through his castle for no real reason, so it was probably best if we only used that route when we had some actual business to attend to.

...Come to think of it, though, it might be useful to have some emergency travel options of our own. Orsted probably knew how to draw teleportation circles, right? Maybe we could create more direct routes to Asura and the other major countries. Apart from the convenience factor, the Man-God wouldn't be able to destroy the circles if nobody even knew they existed. I made a mental note to pitch that project to the boss.

Since the use of teleportation magic was officially forbidden, we made a show of exiting the city before sneaking back in and heading to the palace. By the time we made it there, the sun was already setting; we decided to spend the night in the floating fortress.

Eris, Sylphie, and I shared a single room in Perugius' castle. We'd been a party of eight on our way to Asura, but only three of us were returning. That did put me in a slightly melancholy mood. I found myself gazing into the fireplace with Eris and Sylphie lying in the bed behind me.

Ordinarily we all took separate rooms, but for some reason they'd both wanted to sleep with me tonight. Maybe they'd been in the mood for some physical affection? Things hadn't worked out that way, though... Eris tended to get awkward and hesitant when it wasn't just the two of us. In any case, we'd taken one of the larger guest rooms and cuddled, but I had a tough time falling asleep and ended up slipping out of bed. With nothing to do in particular, I decided to just sit down and let my thoughts wander for a while.

It was a very quiet night. The crackling of the flames was the only sound I could hear.

As I watched the fire flicker, I found myself reflecting on the events of the last few weeks.

I'd won this battle. I'd beaten the Man-God. It felt fair to call this a *complete* victory, in fact—no one in our party had died, we'd dealt with all of the disciples, and Ariel had secured the throne of Asura. Yet somehow, I didn't feel especially happy or reassured. All I'd really done was follow a path Orsted had laid out for me. And as crucial as this battle was, it was only the first round in a long war. I was going to *keep* fighting battles like this from now on—stressful, murky battles where victory brought no real relief.

What had I even accomplished this time, really? Ariel had solved half my problems for me. I'd nearly gotten Eris killed. And I needed

Orsted's help to deal with Reida. I wasn't seeing much ground for optimism there...

"...Rudy?"

As I was turning all this over in my mind, Sylphie stirred and sat up in bed.

"You're still up?"

"Yeah."

"It's the middle of the night, you know."

Her gaze had turned to the window; it was pitch-black out there. A few hours must have passed since she and Eris fell asleep.

"Phew..."

But instead of going back to sleep, she slipped out of bed and took a seat beside me—cuddling closely and leaning her head on my shoulder. I put my arm around her in return.

Neither of us said anything for a while. Sylphie's body was nice and warm. Hot, even. It almost made me think she might be running a fever or something.

As I studied the nape of her neck, she lifted her head slightly to meet my gaze. Her eyes were shining slightly in the firelight.

This felt like the part where I should kiss her, so I squeezed her shoulder a little tighter—

"You know..."

And then she started to speak.

"When I quit my job as Ariel's bodyguard, it was like all the air went out of me."

Drawing back from my kiss, I nodded and waited for Sylphie to continue.

"All I could do was sit around and think: *Wow. It's really over, huh?*"

Something like relief showed on her face as she got those words out. Sylphie had been Princess Ariel's guardian for *eight years*—from the age of ten to eighteen. She'd spent her entire adolescence with Luke and Ariel. I had to imagine she was feeling a sense of loss right now.

I wasn't sure if I could fill this void for her. But maybe that wasn't my role to play in the first place. I was Sylphie's husband now. I wasn't her friend, and I couldn't replace her friends.

"But you know, Rudy, I did think this through beforehand," Sylphie said after a moment. "Up till now, I was so busy with Princess Ariel that I barely spent any time looking after Lucie. So I'd like to stay at home with her from now on."

I looked over. Her expression was more confident than I'd expected.

"Our baby's getting bigger by the day, you know? I'm sure she's going to need a lot more attention soon."

Sylphie paused for a moment to nuzzle her head against my shoulder. I reached out and ruffled her hair affectionately. Her head seemed a little hotter than usual, although I might have been imagining it.

"So I think I'll focus on taking care of her," Sylphie continued. "I want to be a *good* mother for a change, I guess."

I'd never thought of Sylphie as a bad mother. But by the standards of this world, I guess you could have called her neglectful. The only people who let maids raise their kids for them were nobles, and we were just an ordinary family.

Still, I wasn't from this world originally. Back in the place I came from, two-income marriages weren't unusual in the slightest.

"You know...if there's anything else you want to do, I'm fine with that too."

Sylphie was only eighteen. She was considered a full-fledged grownup in this world, but she was still very young. There was plenty of time for her to find new goals or chase her dreams. It's not like I wanted her to ignore our kid or spend all her time partying, but I felt like she could juggle taking care of Lucie *and* pursuing something else.

Then again, maybe I wasn't taking our responsibilities to our kid seriously enough. I wasn't exactly the world's best dad myself.

"Hmm... I'm not sure what that would be, though." Sylphie cocked her head to the side and looked up at me thoughtfully. "I did want to be more like Eris for a while, I guess."

"Really?"

What did Eris have that Sylphie wanted? The first words that popped into my mind were *big breasts*. I liked Sylphie's just the way they were, honestly. But if she really wanted to work on this, I could always give her a daily massage to stimulate—

Come on, Rudeus. Let's try to take this seriously.

"Yeah. I mean, she's basically your equal, right?" said Sylphie. "You fight together. She watches your back, and you watch hers. That always made me kind of envious." She paused. "But after that battle with Orsted... and how things went this time... I think I finally put that behind me. I'm never going to be a match for Eris. Or for you."

I couldn't agree with that. Sylphie was a very talented mage in her own right. She wasn't on Eris' level in combat, to be sure. But what could you expect? Eris had devoted her entire life to mastering swordplay. And Sylphie had plenty of skills that Eris didn't.

"So I decided to give up on getting stronger, and find a different way to support you."

Oh. Now I was starting to understand. Sylphie wanted to watch my back in a way that Eris couldn't.

“And that led you to this stay-at-home idea?”

“Yep. It sounds Roxy wants to keep teaching at the University, so I’ll look after all the kids for our family. I’ll make sure they learn their manners, teach them what I know, and help them grow up safe and strong.”

My feelings about her proposal were a mixture of gratitude and guilt. In all likelihood, I wouldn’t be able to spend much time taking care of the kids myself. Our battle against the Man-God wasn’t over yet. That meant Orsted was going to keep sending me on these missions, dispatching me to far-off places to fight his enemies.

“You okay with leaving that to me, Rudy?”

On the other hand...Sylphie had settled on this as her new goal. She’d found a role to play, and she was ready to move from one stage of her life into the next.

“Of course. I know you’ll do a great job.”

I felt overwhelmed with sudden affection for my wife. Sylphie was always cute, but right now she looked even more adorable than usual. Unable to control myself any longer, I leaned in and kissed her on the lips. She didn’t try to pull away, so I let my hand slide down from her shoulder to her butt.

Sylphie’s eyes opened wide with surprise, and she looked a little uncertain for a moment. But then she lifted her waist a little...

...and I froze like a warrior who’d met Medusa’s gaze. I could *feel* someone watching me, but from where?

Oh. The bed.

Eris was awake, and she was looking our way with glittering eyes. I’m not talking about sparkly, happy glittering, either. This was more of an *angry tiger* scenario.

Why did she always just watch silently when she caught me with the other girls? It was mildly terrifying.

"Sorry. I guess we should just go to bed for tonight."

"Huh? Oh... Yeah, I guess you're right."

Sylphie and I headed back over to the bed and got in next to Eris. There was time enough for the romance once we got back home. Perugius might be spying on us, anyway.

"Come on, Eris. Don't ruin the mood like that."

"S-Sorry... But you were being all *sneaky*..."

"No I wasn't. You're always welcome to join in, you know? Want to give it a try?"

"You can't b-be serious. That sounds *so* embarrassing..."

Hmm. I felt like it would be more embarrassing for me than anybody else. Eris tended to put me in some borderline humiliating positions...

As I closed my eyes and listened to my wives whisper to each other, I felt a sense of satisfaction wash over me.

Sylphie had taken a big step forward in these last few days. She'd closed out one chapter of her life, and found a way to change herself. I needed to learn from her example. With her watching my back, maybe I could find a way to be less fearful of the future.

That was the last thought in my mind as I drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 14: Home Again

THE MAGIC CITY OF SHARIA hadn't changed a bit in the two months we'd been gone.

Well, I guess a few buildings had been finished, and some repairs of the city walls were now complete. But that was really about it.

I mean, I hadn't *expected* much to change. Orsted had guaranteed the safety of my family, after all. If I'd come back home to find the city a smoking pile of ashes, I probably would have started up a labor union on the spot. I smiled to myself, picturing me and Ariel donning headbands and barging into the boss' office to demand a collective bargaining agreement.

Of course, the idea might have seemed less funny if something had happened in my absence. I guess I *was* feeling a little relieved to see everything the same as always.

We made our way through the city's streets and plazas to our home. The house looked just as we'd left it. It wasn't a smoldering ruin, encased in ice, or surrounded by magical thorns. Byt was wriggling around in the front yard as he photosynthesized, and Dillo was snoozing in his armadillo house. Everything seemed peaceful.

"We're hooome."

"Welcome back!"

As we opened the front door, I heard the pattering of footsteps from the back of the house. Within seconds, Aisha appeared and threw herself into my arms. That girl never got any less energetic.

"Where's my present?! You guys didn't forget, did you?!"

"Nope," said Eris, pulling a box out of her baggage. "Here you go."

Aisha popped out of my hug and accepted it eagerly. "Yay! Thanks, Eris!"

She opened the box right away; it contained an oval ceramic trinket with a long handle covered in delicate engravings.

Aisha's eyes lit up with excitement as she examined it. "Oh! This is a hand mirror, right? I remember seeing these in Shirone!"

"That's right!"

There was a lot of fancy glassware available in Asura, probably because they traded extensively with the Begaritt Continent. Since our journey home was nice and short, we'd picked up a bunch of mirrors and baubles to bring back with us.

"Oh, it's *beautiful*... I bet it cost a bundle! Hee hee hee!"

"Heheh. Glad you like it!"

Eris looked very proud at Aisha's overjoyed reaction, but it was Sylphie who'd actually picked that mirror out. Eris had decent taste herself, but she always went for overly simple stuff like sturdy kitchen knives.

"Hmm... Wow, I really *am* adorable, aren't I?!"

Aisha spun around examining herself from various angles, giving herself plenty of compliments in the process. She kept right on going until Lilia showed up and clapped her upside the head.

It was kind of soothing, seeing my little sister so excited and full of life. I guess we'd made a good choice on that present.

"...Hi, Lilia. Anything happen while we were gone? Is everyone doing all right?"

Expressionless as ever, Lilia nodded slightly. "Yes. We're all safe and sound."

"That's good to hear."

I was fairly sure things were fine from the moment I walked in the door, but it was still a relief to know for certain.

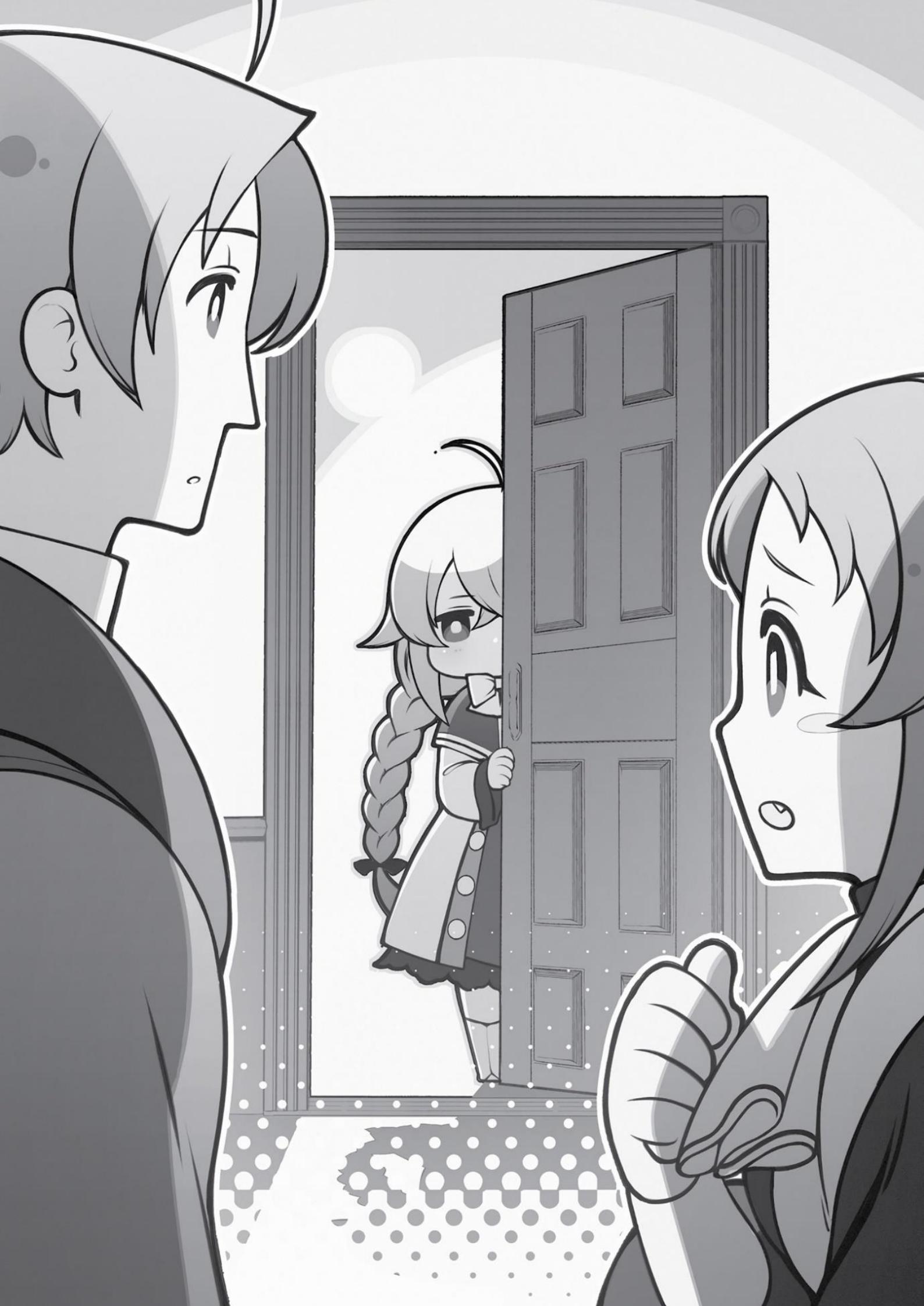
“Oh, wait,” said Aisha, her expression suddenly darkening.
“There is one thing, Rudeus. It’s Roxy...”

What? What’s wrong with Roxy?! Don’t tell me she lost the baby!

Okay, no, calm down. Lilia definitely would have mentioned that. Maybe she’s just a little sick? Or in the hospital?

“Uhm, she got a little tu—”

Aisha stopped herself in midsentence. Her eyes had turned to the doorway to our living room. Roxy was peeking out from behind the door with only half her body visible.



"Hey there, Roxy," I called. "We just got back."

At a glance, she didn't *look* sick or injured. More like the picture of health.

"Welcome home, Rudy," she replied... without emerging from behind the door. "I was honestly expecting you to be gone a little longer. Since you're back right on time, I'm guessing things went well?"

"Yep. Princess Ariel managed to come out on top."

She hadn't technically taken the throne yet, and there was still a *chance* we'd get word of her assassination in a few months... but it felt so unlikely I couldn't see much point dwelling on it.

"I see. That's certainly good to hear."

For some reason, Roxy still wasn't revealing herself. All I could really see was her face. But on closer examination, her cheeks looked puffier than usual.

Wait, did she get a little tubby? Is that it? Come on, Roxy! You're pregnant, it's totally natural! You need to put on weight for the baby! I mean, it's not like I'd mind you putting on some pounds in the first place. Eris probably weighs twice as much as you...

"U-Uhm, Rudeus?" said Aisha tentatively. "Roxy's feeling a little bit...delicate lately. Make sure to be really nice to her, okay?"

Well, I could understand that. She had to be anxious about her pregnancy, and now she had this sudden weight gain on her mind as well. And when my wife felt uneasy, it was my job to reassure her.

"I wouldn't say I'm feeling *delicate*."

"Why are you hiding behind the door, then?" asked Sylphie.

Slowly, reluctantly, Roxy shuffled out from her hiding place.

Her belly had gotten noticeably larger in the two months we'd been away from home. The baby was probably contributing a few pounds all on its own at this point.

Hmm. Maybe I was just seeing things, but I thought her breasts were bigger as well. Normally you wouldn't even notice them when she was wearing clothes. Today their presence was fairly obvious. Was she producing milk yet? Would she let me take a taste? Intriguing questions, which I'd have to look into at a later date. In any case, it seemed like the Migurd went through pregnancy more or less the same way humans did, even though they were technically "demons."

"My body...doesn't feel like it belongs to me anymore," said Roxy. "My belly's all swollen, and I can feel the baby squirming around inside me... Everyone says there's nothing to worry about, but I can't help worrying..."

"Oh, I know what you mean," said Sylphie sympathetically. "I felt the exactly same way when I was pregnant. And of course, Rudy always has to run off somewhere when you're feeling anxious..."

I felt a stab of guilt. *I'm sorry... I didn't have any other choice, I swear...*

"*Sniffle...* S-Sorry, Sylphie... Sorry, Roxy..."

"What? Oh. I'm not really blaming you or anything, Rudy." Smiling awkwardly, Sylphie avoided my teary gaze. "Uhm, I know. Why don't you two spend the rest of the day together? I bet that will make Roxy feel better. Is that okay with you, Eris?"

"Hm? Uh, s-sure..."

Eris kept glancing from her stomach to Roxy's. Probably thinking about what it might feel like when her turn came.

"Well, that's settled, then," said Sylphie briskly. "Rudy, you go spend some time with Roxy. I'll deal with our bags and everything... Uhm, where's Lucie at the moment?"

"She's playing with Miss Zenith up on the second floor."

"Thanks, Lilia... Come on, Eris, you help too."

“Sure.”

Without waiting for me to reply, Sylphie and Eris grabbed our bags and headed up to the second floor to start unpacking.

Following my marching orders, I headed into the living room with Roxy, where I found our pet Sacred Beast curled up by the fireplace. He let out a deep *woof* at the sight of me and trotted over, wagging his tail happily. When I petted his head, he started licking my hand. What a good boy.

Roxy and I settled down next to each other on the sofa. She was wearing loose clothing, and seemed to be curling up to hide the shape of her body. Maybe she was feeling self-conscious about her figure? I thought she looked pretty cute this way, though...

“Uhm, Roxy?”

“H-How were things in Asura, anyway? Since you’re back right on schedule, I’m guessing it went smoothly.”

“Didn’t you just ask me that five minutes ago?”

Roxy seemed...flustered. You didn’t see that every day. I wasn’t sure what had her so agitated, but it was kind of adorable, so I didn’t mind. Hopefully she wasn’t going to be this cute all day. Eris and Sylphie had kept me busy in the capital, but with that big work trip behind me I was in the mood to let off some steam.

It was probably better not to push things in a sexual direction if Roxy was feeling this self-conscious, though. I was trying to be a *considerate* husband here.

Okay then, let’s start off with something nice and gentle...

“Uhm... your belly’s gotten pretty big, huh? Can I stroke it?”

“N-No! Absolutely not!”

Wow, she shot that down instantly. I-I guess she’s a little sensitive about her belly in particular? Okay, what about—

“D-Don’t touch my breasts, either.”

Didn’t even get to ask. Does she think I’m obsessed with breasts or something? I mean, I guess she isn’t wrong, but still!

“They’ve been leaking this weird yellow liquid lately...”

“I see.”

The same thing had happened with Sylphie. Probably meant her body was getting ready to produce milk. I would have been delighted to give her some helpful massages, but it seemed like that wasn’t going to happen.

“Can I stroke your head, at least?”

Roxy responded to this by leaning slightly toward me. I ran my hand gently over her head, enjoying the silky texture of her hair.

Her belly and breasts were off-limits, and her head was okay to touch. Now I needed to find *exactly* where she drew the line. This might require a bit of trial and error. “How about your butt?”

“...W-Well, I guess that’s all right.”

Roxy blushed, but gave me her consent. I ran my hand along her bottom. It was nice and *round* today.

Gah. No. You’re supposed to be doing the considerate thing, remember? Forget the butt! Think about the baby!

“Uhm... When I’m around the house, I think I’ll try to spend as much time as I can with you.”

“R-Really? You don’t have to force yourself. Aisha’s here to help me, and I know you have a lot of things on your plate.”

“Yeah, but I know it’s tough being pregnant. Maybe I can take you up and down the stairs or help you in the bath? Anything you want.”

“The... The bath?! ”

Roxy seemed seriously alarmed by those words. This was starting to get confusing. Her belly and breasts were off-limits, her head and butt were fine, and the bath was a danger zone? But why?

"That's right..." Roxy murmured. "You do like washing off my body, don't you...?"

Oh, I love it. Especially when you let me use my hands instead of a washcloth. I'll admit I sometimes lose all self-control halfway through, but that's just part of the fun, right?

"Rudy... You're going to find out eventually, so I think I should just get this over with."

"Okay..."

I could hear the defeat in Roxy's voice as she turned to face me, and her expression was deadly serious.

Hm? Wait, is there something actually wrong?

Maybe she'd found out the baby was sick. Maybe she'd heard it yelling "Call me the Great Emperor of the Demon World!" from inside her belly.

No, that didn't make any sense. Lilia would have told me if there was a problem that obvious.

What else could it be, then? *Sorry, Rudy, it's not your baby?* Was the kid going to pop out with cat ears and a tail or something? No, no, no... she wouldn't do that to me...

With a solemn expression on her face, Roxy began to unbutton her dress. Then she lifted it up to reveal her pale stomach. Her baby bump was now a full-fledged bulge, and her belly button was protruding slightly from its surface.

My first thought was *cute*. My second thought was *adorable*. Nothing else came to mind, honestly. I wasn't seeing any weird patterns on her skin or anything...

"Uhm... What's the problem here?"

"I-Isn't it obvious?"

Well, no. Or I wouldn't have asked the question.

"My... My belly button's sticking out now, right?"

Yes. Yes, it was. What did that have to do with anything, though? Having all that baby inside her must have pushed it inside out. It was supposedly a common thing for pregnant women.

"Yeah."

"It's... *sniffle*... It's ridiculous, isn't it?"

It seemed Roxy had some strong feelings on the matter. I was beginning to understand what Aisha had meant by "delicate." This belly button might seem like a trivial issue to anyone else, but for Roxy it was currently a *major* problem.

"...No. It's adorable."

"I heard that pause! You can't fool me that easily!"

"I'm not trying to fool you, Roxy. I like it just fine this way."

"Liar! I remember the first time you licked it. You said *Bwheheh, your belly button is the best!* Don't try to deny it!"

Surely I never said anything *that* creepy? Well, sometimes I did get a little carried away in bed. Maybe I did say it. I probably did, huh? Yeah, I definitely did. What a creep.

"Ever since that, I made sure to keep my belly button nice and clean. You must be disappointed to see it ruined like this, right?"

"It's not ruined, Roxy."

This time, I got my response off immediately. It wasn't like I had a fetish for innie belly buttons or anything. As long as it was part of Roxy, I'd lavish it with love no matter what. Even if she could fire missiles from it.

Oh, wait. Now I remembered. I'd licked her belly button on a whim during one of our baby-making sessions, and she got all

embarrassed. It was fun seeing her squirm, so I started barraging her with belly button compliments...

“I’m not falling for this. You’re all talk, Rudy.”

Wow. She really doesn’t want to believe me, huh?

“You want to convince me? Then prove you’re being honest!”

“How am I supposed to prove that?”

The only thing that came to mind was formally establishing the Church of Roxy and delivering a passionate sermon on the matter to several hundred thousand true believers. That would probably take me at least a few days to arrange, so it wasn’t an immediate solution to our dilemma.

Roxy pushed out her belly slightly in my direction. “Lick it.”

“You don’t mind?”

Quite the daring suggestion, madam. Was this really the only thing she wanted from me, though? It felt more like a reward than a test. Surely this was all a bit backward...

Bah. No need to overthink things! The Lord’s will was plain.

All right, everyone. Hands together. Let’s say grace!

Thank you, oh Lord, for this our food...

I licked that belly button.

Leo had wandered over to see what we were up to, so I had to push his head out of the way first. But I licked Roxy’s belly button.

In that moment, something moved inside her belly. It was a small movement, almost like a muscle twitching; but I could clearly feel it through my tongue.

Roxy must have noticed as well. She froze up, and met my gaze as I raised my head.

“The baby just moved.”

“...I guess someone’s saying welcome home to daddy.”

I rose to my feet and ran a hand gently over Roxy's stomach. She'd objected earlier, but this time she didn't seem to mind.

Her belly was nice and warm. Wouldn't want it getting chilled, of course.

Roxy's embarrassment seemed to have melted away all of a sudden. With a tender smile, she reached up and placed a hand on top of mine.

"Thank you, Rudy. I guess Sylphie was right. I do feel a little better now."

Hearing that made me feel a bit relieved myself.

"Sorry to repeat myself, but... Welcome home, Rudy."

"Glad to be back."

I was home again, and all was well.

The next day, I went around town letting my friends know we were back. At this point, that meant Zanoba, Cliff, and Elinalise. I'd already seen Nanahoshi at the floating fortress a few days earlier.

I didn't have that many acquaintances left in the city of Sharia, did I? Everyone was going their separate ways. Even Zanoba and Cliff would probably leave sooner or later.

With that thought, I headed to my final stop of the day. It was evening, and the world had taken on an orange tint by the time I reached the graveyard.

It was a quiet place lined with rows of rounded headstones. Most people wouldn't choose to come here in the twilight, but things had just worked out that way... I'd spent longer than expected on my other visits.

With a brief hello to the groundskeeper on duty, I entered the grounds and headed to the grave I was here to see. The name *Paul Greyrat* was carved on its surface, and it still looked brand new.

I brought my hands together for a moment.

“Hey, Dad. Nobody died this time, either.”

Placing on the grave a bottle of booze I’d bought in Ars and some flowers I’d picked up in the neighborhood, I started in on a quick summary of the most recent developments in our lives. I told Paul about Orsted, the Man-God, and the battles we’d fought in Asura.

“I got to meet your little brother for the first time. My uncle, I guess. He seemed like a pretty faint-hearted guy, but he did remind me of you.”

I pictured Pilemon’s face as I spoke those words. There was definitely a resemblance. They were totally different in terms of build and personality, but you could tell the man was Paul’s brother. There was something similar about the set of their eyes, I think.

“He survived too. Your nephew risked his life to protect him. It made me feel a little envious.”

Luke had acted to save his father, who would otherwise have been executed. Or that was what it looked like to me, at least... I wasn’t there for the entire conversation.

Pilemon wasn’t an admirable person, and we’d originally been intending to kill him. But seeing Luke’s sheer desperation made me want to help him out. I’d ended up stepping in to offer some support.

“I had to murder someone this time. I didn’t deal the fatal blow personally, but I tracked him down and attacked with every intention of killing him, and he died. I don’t regret that, but it did leave a bad taste in my mouth.”

It wasn't like this was the first time I'd killed someone. Similar things had happened before. But this one had really stuck with me. Probably because I'd heard Reida's story a few minutes earlier.

I took a few moments to reflect on everything that had taken place in Asura.

On the whole, the mission went well. We hadn't lost anyone we didn't want to lose, and we'd achieved our objective. Still, it had been a very close call. One small mistake along the way, and we might have lost someone. We probably would have won the battle anyway, but only at a terrible cost.

Yet we'd succeeded this time. Completely. There was no denying that. But I felt like there were plenty of lessons to be learned.

What if we'd managed to defeat Auber at the Red Wyrm's Whiskers?

What if Wi Taa had successfully escaped from our battle in the streets of Ars?

What if Orsted hadn't come running when Reida caught us in her Deprivation Field?

What if Auber hadn't carried the antidote for his poison?

You could drive yourself crazy asking questions like that, of course. Maybe it wasn't productive to dwell on all the details.

There was one thing I knew for sure, though: the enemy was still alive and well. We'd beaten the Man-God once, but the battle for Asura was only the first of many to come. This conflict was going to last for years. Decades. How long could I keep squeaking by like this before something went horribly wrong?

I'd gotten lucky this time. But I hadn't always been so fortunate, had I? I felt like my mistakes had cost me dearly in the past... even if I didn't think of it that way at the time.

Paul's death was a good example. Back then, I convinced myself that things had just worked out badly. And to be sure, I gave that fight everything I had. I made some mistakes and questionable decisions, maybe. But I still did my very best. That allowed me to believe Paul's death was unavoidable. I told myself it was just bad luck. A quirk of fate.

Was that actually true, though?

Could a bit of good luck have saved my father's life? Sure. He'd died at the very last moment, to that Hydra's final attack. The smallest of fortunate coincidences could have prevented that. Or even an *unfortunate* coincidence—like someone getting injured earlier, and forcing us to back out. Maybe if we'd found just one more person for our party...

Well, no point speculating about it. The point was: "luck" could always turn on almost anything. Did I have to keep tossing the dice like this? Flipping a coin and hoping for the best, with the lives of everyone I loved on the line? Many of us had come close to death in Asura. Eris in particular had been badly wounded and then poisoned by Auber. We'd come right to the very edge of disaster and barely survived. Next time, maybe we'd come right up to the edge of victory and die.

Was I willing to leave that in the hands of fate?

Sure, there was always an *element* of luck in life. Human beings had their limits and their weaknesses. It's impossible to control events completely. But when I looked back at my time in Asura, I saw room for improvement. What if I'd had a few more skills? A bit more combat prowess? A few local connections? Maybe I wouldn't have come so close to losing someone. Maybe there were ways I could have made things easier for us.

I had to try to figure out what I was lacking.

I needed to be stronger than this. I needed to hone my skills. I needed more allies I could turn to...

“...Then again, I feel like I was already working on all of that.”

Regrets were just a part of life. There wasn’t enough time in the day to do everything perfectly, and nothing was ever guaranteed, no matter what. My future self had been monstrously powerful, and his life was miserable; sometimes knowing lots of fancy spells wasn’t good enough.

Still...I couldn’t let myself get complacent just because things went well this time.

In my next battles against the Man-God, I wanted to win *cleanly* instead of barely squeaking by. I wanted to be powerful enough to keep my family alive. I wanted to keep them as safe as I possibly could.

I won’t get careless.

That was a promise I’d made before, but it was one I meant to keep. If I ever started to forget about it, I could always come out here for a reminder.

“I’m going to do the best I can, Dad. Keep an eye on me, okay?”

With those words, I turned and left the cemetery.

Extra Chapter:

???

ONE NIGHT, in a place whose name didn't matter, a local bartender witnessed something rather strange.

Specifically, he saw a man—a solitary drunkard.

This man had probably been barhopping for a while before he reached the bartender's establishment. He was already drunk by the time he walked in the door. But he kept on drinking anyway, until he was totally plastered. And then he *still* kept on drinking, until he vomited repeatedly in the bathroom.

Of course, this bartender had seen his fair share of alcoholics. He'd watched a few people drink themselves to death right in front of him, in fact. A drunkard like this was nothing out of the ordinary.

However—something odd happened *late* that night.

"Bweeh... Hmm?"

There were few customers left in the bar at this point. The bartender had been washing plates and thinking about closing shop for the evening. All of a sudden, the drunkard lifted his head as if he'd noticed something. His eyes were totally unfocused, and he looked half-asleep, but for some reason, he turned to face the seat beside him.

There was no one sitting in that chair.

"Hey there, man! It's been a while!"

The drunkard croaked out a greeting and tried to slap his invisible friend on the shoulders. His hand moved smoothly through the empty air, but he didn't seem to notice. He just kept right on talking.

"Aw, what's the matter, chief? You're lookin' pretty gloomy today. Go on, tell me aaall about it."

Deciding the man was just blathering like an idiot, the bartender shook his head and turned back to his dishes.

“What the... Hey, barkeep!”

The bartender glanced up again. The drunkard’s bleary, unfocused gaze was wandering all around the bar.

“How’s about you get this guy a beer too, huh?”

The bartender had no idea who *this guy* was supposed to be, but he wasn’t going to refuse an order. He was just about to reply, when—

“The hell? Guess he wandered off somewhere. What kinda customer service is that, huh?”

The drunkard just decided he was nowhere to be found, and began loudly badmouthing him to his non-existent buddy. The bartender heaved a heavy sigh. He dealt with rambling drunks on a regular basis, but the ones who talked *total* nonsense could get violent sometimes. This man didn’t look like much of a fighter, but the last thing he wanted at the end of long night was to spend an hour mopping blood and teeth off his floor.

Rather than flailing around at random, however, the man went right on speaking to the empty chair beside him. And as he listened, the bartender began to feel a bit unnerved. For the rambling monologue of a drunk, this...sounded a *lot* like one half of an actual conversation.

“Oh yeah? So, what... someone wants you dead?”

“Hah! Yeah, I bet you make yourself *plenty* of enemies. Hell, I’d probably hate your guts myself if I was seein’ things from a different point of view. Good thing I’m such an easygoing guy, huh?”

“...What? You’re asking me for a favor? Now that’s downright unusual.”

"Uh-huh. Look, the last time I did you a solid, things went real bad for me. You *do* remember what happened to my hometown, right?"

"You're sorry? Hahah! Man, that sounds weird coming from you. Must be a cold one in hell tonight!"

"Oh? It really that bad? Bad enough you need *my* help?"

"Hmm..."

"Well, sure. You've saved my bacon plenty of times. I did appreciate that heads-up in the labyrinth earlier, for the record."

"Yeah, didn't work out that great in the end, but that's on us. We just weren't cut out for the job, I guess."

"Oh brother, here we go. I try to be nice, and you think I'm showing you my belly..."

"Fine. If there's something I can do, I guess I'll hear you out."

"...Oh? Hohoh."

"Knowing you, that ain't surprising in the slightest."

"So who's this guy who's after you?"

"Whoah! Now that's a scary name. Come on, man... are you pulling my leg or what?"

"Huh? What? How is he *nothing special*? Damn. Small fry, huh? Listen to you!"

"So what's the problem, then?"

"...Aaah."

"So that's how it is. Him too, huh? Hmm... yeah, that explains a lot, actually."

"Hm? Am I gonna help or not?"

"Well, I dunno... I kinda liked the kid, honestly..."

"...Whoa. Somebody's awful cranky all of a sudden."

“Damn, you’re desperate, aren’t you? I thought I was a *worthless piece of trash*. You want my help that bad?”

“Fine! Fiiiine! I’ll help you out, man.”

“So? What’s the plan? I haven’t seen him in a while, but he’s damn good at what he does.”

“Ah, let’s hear it... Uh, a team? So you wanna gather up a bunch of guys like me?”

“Okay, right. Then what?”

“...Yeah, I think I get the idea. Dunno if it’ll work out or not, but hey. Guess we’ll give it a shot.”

“Fwaah...”

At this point, the man collapsed forward onto his table and started sleeping like a log. And the bartender, who’d heard every word of his “conversation,” found himself thinking some unsettling thoughts. Had this man just made a deal with the devil? Was there some sort of profoundly evil *thing* sitting in that chair that only he could see? And was that thing going to creep up behind the bartender and whisper *“You should’ve minded your own business”* in his ear?

“Ridiculous.” With a firm shake of his head, the bartender approached the sleeping drunkard and shook him gently by the shoulder. “Hey, buddy. We’re about to close up for the night. Mind heading somewhere else to get your beauty sleep?”

After a few more vigorous shakes, the drunkard twitched and slowly pushed himself up off the table. “Muh...? Mm.”

All of his manic energy seemed to have disappeared completely. Rising unsteadily to his feet, he took a few copper coins from his pocket and tossed them on the table. And then he staggered off toward the exit, zigzagging erratically as he went.

Almost looks like a puppet, the bartender thought as he dropped the coins into his pocket. Turning away, he headed back toward the kitchen...and then stopped as he heard the drunkard mutter something to himself. The man's voice was soft, but somehow the bartender heard him very clearly.

"Man, this sucks. But I owe him a lot, and the kid owes *me*... so if I have to pick sides, I guess this is how it's gonna be."

It wasn't the voice of a demon. But it was a much *colder* voice than you'd expect from a drunk.

A shiver made its way down the bartender's spine. When he turned back toward the exit, however, the only sign that anyone had even been there was the faintly tinkling bell on the inside of his door.

About the Author:
Rifujin na Magonote

Resides in Gifu Prefecture. Loves fighting games and protein. Inspired by other published works on the website *Let's be Novelists*, they created the webnovel *Mushoku Tensei*. They instantly gained the support of readers, hitting number one on the site's combined popularity rankings within one year of publication.

“Sometimes it’s surprisingly hard to understand the people who you’re closest to,” commented the author thoughtfully.



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